



Assessing the Difficulty of Workforce Diversification: The Case of State Fish and Wildlife Agencies in the Southeast

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Abstract

The absence of minority representation in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast has been the focus of scholarly discussion over the past decades. Scholars attribute the non-representation to a number of factors, which include unavailability of opportunities for minorities, unfavorable work conditions, employment discrimination and the lack of awareness about position availability. One of the greatest factors has been the failure to actively pursue minority applicants. The failure to diversify state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast and the inability to make them representative of their state populations have been contentious issues.

This study evaluates workforce diversity in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast by analyzing demographic and other statistical data to determine the level of representation of minority groups or the lack thereof in the workforce. In order to accomplish these objectives, responses from Executive Directors and members of the Minorities in Natural Resources Committee are studied. Despite the many divergences to workforce diversity, there is still an opportunity for agency executives to take drastic measures to ensure all groups are represented in their respective organizations. Workforce diversity is an inevitable phenomenon in today's society. The discourse has been widely implemented in organizations throughout the United States, but in some state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast, this has not been the case. Organizations must increase awareness of opportunities that exist within them, and they must also work hard to dispel the negative images that have guided them through the years. More importantly, they must strive to become organizations that are inclusive and not exclusive.



Aggressive recruitment strategies, sound mentoring programs, and more solid partnerships are measures that can be taken to usher in these changes.

Introduction

The issue of racial diversity and the inadequate representation of minorities in the workforce has been the focus of scholarly research in recent decades. The United States is generally viewed as a racially and ethnically diverse country, "yet minorities and women are grossly underrepresented in wildlife and natural resources professions."¹ Scholars contend that the lack of representativeness of racial minorities in public agencies, most especially in the natural resources profession, delimits the agency's ability to adequately represent the community it serves.² In recent years, there has been a significant upsurge in the American populace, with large increases in the Hispanic and Asian populations. The 2010 U.S. Census report estimated that over 309 million people reside in the U.S., of which 51 percent are women.³ "Hispanic, Asian and multiracial segments are expanding," while the African American population remains steady, with a small decline in the White population.⁴ Joann Charles has argued that "the perception of equity in hiring practices is magnified in its importance, when the applicant is a minority and the organization is a government agency." Charles maintains that "in order to successfully manage the projected increase of African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, older workers, and to maintain adequate minority

¹Ronald Davis, Sr., et al. "Increasing Diversity in Our Profession," *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 30, no 2, (Wiley: Summer, 2002): 1.

²National Program/Center for Workforce Diversity for the Natural Resource Professions, January 30, 2013, http://www.naufrp.org/pdf/diversity_workingpaper.PDF

³*Future Work: Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century Executive Summary*, United States Census Bureau. Available at: <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/herman/reports/futurework/execsum.htm;;> Age and Sex Composition.

⁴Roel Lopez and Columbus Brown, "How Workforce Diversity Helps Conservation," *Wildlife Professional* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 21.



group representation, organizations will have to revisit their diversity plans and initiatives.” Further, she believes that unless the "government continues to build a civil service talent pool with available minority workers, it will continue to contend with a human capital crisis and a deteriorating representative bureaucracy."⁵

Fish and wildlife agencies are primarily responsible for protecting the fish and wildlife resources in their respective jurisdictions, yet, the agencies have not been able to erase the perceived negative barriers that have stunted career advancement for minorities. The most notable barriers are the lack of opportunities for women, an unfavorable work environment, employment discrimination, and lack of upward mobility for women and minorities. Indications are that those women and minorities who are employed in these agencies express feelings of isolation and a lack of support by peers and other high-ranking officials within the organization. Even though state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast are aware of these negative barriers and perceptions, these types of problems and practices continue unabated. Haynes and Jacobson, in their 1993 study, attributed the conspicuous absence and underrepresentation of minorities in natural resources professions to three factors:

- 1) the lack of positive early exposure to nature and wildlife;
- 2) the lack of support through the education process-to-career pipeline; and
- 3) agencies' inability to attract and retain minorities.⁶

Jennifer Rokosa in her study of equality in the Senior Executive Services, observed that these problems are not just unique within natural resources professions, but is a common phenomenon in government bureaucracies. Rokosa suggests that the "profound demographic shift in the United States will ultimately erase ethnic majorities,"

⁵Joann Charles, "Exploratory Assessment of Minority Group Representation in State Government," *Public Personnel Management* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 562.

⁶Nia Haynes and Susan Jacobson, "Underrepresentation of Minorities in Natural Resource Careers: Examining Attitudes Towards Natural Resource Careers and Perceptions of Career Barriers," abstract, <http://www.cpe.vt.edu/ndc/presentations/Abstract4.pdf>.



increase diversity and ultimately improve efficiency and effectiveness of our American democracy.⁷

While research has identified a number of the accrued benefits of a diverse workforce in the natural sciences, very little has been done relative to fish and wildlife agencies. The pervasive racial and gender-biased hiring practices in Southeastern fish and wildlife agencies are well documented. To address these issues, some fish and wildlife agencies have aggressively worked to attract and retain racial and ethnic minorities, including women. Unknown is the extent to which these efforts have been successful and the factors contributing to their success. Understanding the effectiveness of existing diversity efforts will provide fish and wildlife agencies sufficient evidence-based information on how to strengthen recruitment and retention efforts. Without this information, fish and wildlife agencies will be ill-prepared to address the needs of increasing minority populations which will utilize their services and programs.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this research is the representative bureaucratic theory. Representative bureaucracy contends that "passive representation, or the extent to which a bureaucracy employs people of diverse demographic backgrounds, will lead to active representation, or the pursuit of policies reflecting the interests and desires of the population served."⁸ This theory is most appropriate because it helps explain how organizations can bring about new perspectives, become more inclusive and promote equality while delivering the best service to the public. A question that prior research has failed to adequately address is whether such passive representation is linked to more active representation in state fish and wildlife bureaucracies. To this end, this inquiry develops a model of representative bureaucracy and tests it empirically in a sample of state fish and wildlife executive

⁷Rokosa, Jennifer, "A Diverse Government from the Top Down: Focusing on Equality in the Senior Executive Service," Center for American Progress," (accessed on November 13, 2013).

⁸Sally Selden, *The Promise of Representative Bureaucracy: Diversity and Responsiveness in a Government Agency* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 5.



directors in the Southeast as well as members of the Minorities in Natural Resources Conservation Committee. The model incorporates as a critical variable the influence of executives on the number of employees and the level of diversity in these organizations.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to existing literature on diversity and informs policymakers of the need for effective workforce diversity in government agencies. Further, this study extends future research on diversity in natural resources conversations and explores many of the areas that have been overlooked in previous studies. For more than four decades since the passage of Civil Rights Act and a series of other legislative enactments to increase minority underrepresentation in employment in the United States, minorities, especially women, are severely underrepresented and systematically excluded from employment opportunities within the natural resources profession. As Joann Charles puts it, "unless the government continues to build a civil service talent pool with available minority workers, it will have to continue to contend with a human capital crisis and a deteriorating representative bureaucracy."⁹

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Overall question: Are state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast representative of a diverse workforce population?

- RQ1.** How does early exposure to nature and wildlife increase the likelihood of minorities choosing careers in natural resources?
- RQ2.** Have current recruitment strategies in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast increased the number of minorities who pursue natural resources conservation careers?
- RQ3.** Are individuals who had mentors throughout their education-to-career pipeline more likely to advance in natural resources conservation careers?

⁹Joann Charles, "Exploratory Assessment of Minority Group Representation in State Government," *Public Personnel Management* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 562.



Research Hypotheses

- H¹** The number of minorities in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast is not reflective of a diverse workforce.
- H²** Lack of awareness of career opportunities in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast has an impact on the number of minorities who pursue natural resources careers.
- H³** Current recruitment strategies in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast have not been successful in attracting minorities.
- H⁴** The presence of mentor relationships has led to an increase in the number of minorities who pursue natural resources careers in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast.

Research Design

This study was conducted utilizing a case study research design to examine state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast to determine their level of workforce diversity. The study encompassed two surveys as the data collection instruments. This study occurred at one point in time, thus making it cross-sectional. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed and the statistics were both descriptive and inferential. The tools that were utilized to analyze the data were descriptive and inferential statistics, graphs, charts, the t-test and the index of qualitative variation (IQV). The statistical tools allowed the findings to be implemented.

The Population

The population for this study consisted of Executive Directors in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast and past and present members of the Minorities in Natural Resources Conservation Committee with knowledge of the agencies' recruitment, hiring, retention, and diversity policies and practices.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this research is state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast. State fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast are the agencies with the



primary responsibility for managing and conserving the natural resources. As such, they should reflect the general population. State fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast were chosen because of their role in conservation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study are derived from varied sources. The primary data source was a self-administered survey of the Executive Directors of state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast, and a survey of Minorities in Natural Resources Committee members. Both self-administered surveys contained structured open- and closed-ended questions constructed specifically for this research. The survey consisted of questions targeted to gather data on the obstacles to diversification of state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast and ways to increase diversity within these agencies. Secondary data sources include data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Census archives, books, journal articles, library resources at Mississippi State University, University of Mississippi, Mississippi College, Belhaven University, and Jackson State University, Internet searches and other archival references.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to determine the extent to which diversity initiatives had an effect on workforce diversification in state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast. The index of qualitative variation (IQV) was used to compare the racial/ethnic diversity of state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast.¹⁰ Descriptive statistics were used to describe the state of employment in Southeastern fish and wildlife agencies.

Analytic Procedure

Descriptive statistics were used to present quantitative data in a manageable form and to describe the basic features of the data in this study. With graphics analysis, the descriptive statistics formed the basis of the quantitative analysis of data. Inferential

¹⁰Earl Babbie, *Practice of Social Research*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Washworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1979), 278-282.



statistics were utilized to make inferences from the data to more general conditions. For document analysis and content analysis, the researcher used qualitative data.

The independent variables were operationalized at the nominal level. The variables were: 1) the lack of exposure to wildlife, 2) the lack of support through the education process-to-career-pipeline, and 3) the inability to attract and retain minorities.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

The limitation of this study is that there was no opportunity to conduct this investigation using comparisons with similar studies. Secondary statistical information was retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau. Although this information was useful, it did not provide a complete breakdown of all positions by race within state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast. In addition to this limitation, information obtained by surveys had to be extracted in a manner that minimized conflict between the researcher and the directors of these agencies. It is imperative to note, that the goal of the research was not to damage credibility, but rather to offer meaningful recommendations that can assist state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast in their workforce diversity efforts.

Another limitation was the inability to meet with those individuals responsible for the creation and retention of missing data pertinent to the research, because of time and cost implications. Finally, although literature in this field has increased over the years, publications on the topic of state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast are still very limited. Also, findings are not generalizable beyond the scope of the study.

Delimitations

The delimitation of this study is that it was confined to only state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeastern portion of the United States. As a result, the research did not consider other agencies outside of the Southeastern United States nor its territories, and findings would not be generalizable beyond the scope of this study. The final delimitation of the study is that it would not necessarily be applicable to other professions.

The overall question guiding this research was "are state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast representative of a diverse workforce." Findings suggest



they are not. In comparing racial/ethnic diversity of state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast, demographics of these agencies were used to develop the Index of Qualitative Variation (IQV) which is used as a measure of variability for nominal variables such as race and ethnicity.¹¹ Clearly, the most diverse state in fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast is Mississippi with an IQV of 0.40. Minorities account for 22.24% of the total state wildlife, fisheries and parks workforce. Behind Mississippi is Texas with an IQV of 0.39, and a 20.32% minority representation. South Carolina ranks third with an IQV of 0.31 and a minority representation of 16.01%. The state with the least diversity is Georgia with an IQV of 0.02, an indication that minorities are not well represented, with 0.88% percent of the workforce. The second to the least diverse state is Tennessee with an IQV of 0.04 and a 1.39% minority representation. The third to the least diverse state is Kentucky with an IQV of 0.04 and a 1.26% minority rate.

State fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast are not representative of a diverse workforce population. The majority of employees are white full-time employees, despite skepticism that a bureaucracy representative of the people it serves would make policy decisions more responsive to the public.¹² Blacks comprise 5%, Hispanics 1.5%, Pacific Islanders 3.53% and "other" ethnic groups make up the remaining 1.32% of the workforce. Employees are classified in the following descriptions: full-time, permanent, hourly, temporary, or contract employees. Studies have found that under certain conditions, passive racial and ethnic representation can produce active representation, that is, policies that benefit minorities.

¹¹Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and Anna Y. Leon-Guerrero, *Social Statistics for a Diverse Society*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2009), 138-144.

¹²Kenneth J. Meier and Lloyd G. Nigro, "Representative Bureaucracy and Policy Preferences," *Public Administration Review* 36 (July/August, 1976), 458-469.

¹²Kenneth J. Meier and Joseph Stewart, Jr., *The Politics of Hispanic Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Sally Coleman Seldon, Jeffrey L. Brudney, and J. Edward Kellough, "Bureaucracy as a Representative Institution: Toward a Reconciliation of Bureaucracy.



Overall, this research presents a compelling argument that the potential for workforce diversification may be significant within the senior level bureaucratic ranks of fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast. The data support the critical assumption underlying the concept of representative bureaucracy that race and other demographic characteristics are related to the attitudes held by both citizens and public administrators, and more importantly, employees. The findings suggest that demographic backgrounds and socialization experiences significantly influence attitudes regarding the desirability of a government labor force that seeks to represent the preferences of a historically disadvantaged group. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of representative bureaucracy by suggesting that the impact of race and gender on the adoption of minority representation roles by administrators operates through the formation of attitudes consistent with those of all citizens served by natural resources conservation organizations.

Given the importance of representative bureaucracy in determining the potential for active representation, future work examining its determinants in other contexts would be beneficial. Public policy makers and administrators should take a proactive approach and begin the process of modifying the current culture to one that will accommodate the needs of a changing demographic workforce. According to scholars, diversity has a positive impact on the workplace, increases competitiveness in the global market, and improves education in college classrooms. The minority labor force is an important source of labor in the 21st century. Thus, in the aftermath of anti-affirmative action legislation, the recognition of the value that diversity brings to the workforce, and with the looming shortage of workers to meet labor demands, private and public organizations have a renewed interest in the recruitment and retention of ethnically and racially diverse professionals, and state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast should be no different. Predicted labor shortages in America and in many professions makes it essential that organizations increase the number of minorities and women with the skills necessary to fulfill their labor demand.

The findings in this study point to several factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of minorities and women in state fish and wildlife agencies in Southeastern states in the United States. According to Esty et al., diversity in the



workplace can reduce lawsuits and increase marketing opportunities, recruitment, creativity, and business image.¹³ Thus, in an era where flexibility and creativity are keys to competitiveness, diversity is critical for an organization's long-term sustainable success. Public organizations must remain competitive and continue to strive to come up with new strategies and technology if they are to remain beneficial to society. Also, the consequences, such as loss of time and money should not be overlooked. The respondents unanimously (100%) agree that diversity contributed to work productivity. These numbers suggest that respondents understand the significance of diversity. Therefore, if state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast were to become more diverse, their level of productivity would increase drastically.

Recommendations

The issue of minority representation in the American workforce, especially state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast, has been the focus of scholarly attention in the past few decades. Scholars contend that despite the increases in minority populations in the U.S., their level of representation in some agencies remained minimal at best. The inaccessibility of minorities in employment opportunity has undoubtedly weakened their involvement in policy formulation and decision making, thus undermining the principle of representative bureaucracy. Scholars attributed the poor representation of minorities in state fish and wildlife agencies to a number of factors which include the unavailability of opportunity for minorities, unfavorable work conditions, employment discrimination, unawareness of position availability in state fish and wildlife agencies by minorities, and the lack of aggressive searches for qualified minority applicants by the organizations. Other reasons include the lack of early exposure of minorities to natural resources careers and the unavailability of minority role models. Primarily, state fish and wildlife agencies were established to improve conservation and boost wildlife, fisheries and parks opportunities for outdoor recreation, and bolster community sportsmanship and awareness through diverse recreational activities.

¹³Katharine Esty, Richard Griffin, and Marcie Schorr-Hirsh, *Workplace Diversity: A Managers Guide to Solving Problems and Turning Diversity into a Competitive Advantage* (Avon, MA: Adams Media Corporation, 1995), 2.



Acknowledging the need for intervention, this research offers the following recommendations:

1. That all state fish and wildlife agencies hire a diversity consulting firm with diversity and recruitment expertise to study their agency's diversity efforts. Agency employees should be included in this process. The consulting firm should continue to work with the agency until a comprehensive diversity plan with measurable outcomes has been developed. The diversity plan should include documented efforts to increase the number of minorities in executive level decision-making positions.
2. That agencies must develop a comprehensive mentoring program. Such mentoring programs should be created and implemented by the appropriate department or division (e.g., Department/Division of Human Resources, Diversity Office, etc.). According to the findings of the study, individuals who pursue natural resources careers do so at a very early age. A youth outreach campaign should be established geared toward youth and their preferences. Youth workshops, clinics, and programs for diverse youth should also be implemented. After reaching these youth, a database should be maintained that will allow the organizations to track the students that have expressed an interest in pursuing a natural resources career. Too many times students previously mentored lose interest and pursue other career paths because of continued support and lack of follow-up.
3. That agencies start an aggressive recruitment campaign. This means informing minorities of natural resources careers and the conservation of natural resources. Organizations should focus job announcement postings in venues within the minority communities, such as churches, civic organizations, sororities/fraternities, career training centers, etc. Clearly qualified applicants are out there, therefore organizations must not stop until they find where they are.
4. Hold focus group meetings in minority communities to discuss agency goals, objectives, mission, conservation, programs, and career opportunities, within underrepresented populations.
5. That there be diverse interview panels, removing disqualifiers that have a disparate impact on a particular group and more Human Resources oversight. By removing these barriers, organizations are more likely to have a more diverse pool of applicants. By monitoring the operations of human resources, agency leaders will be able to see the efforts that are being made and what is being done to correct those areas lacking in minority representation.



6. That agencies partner with HBCUs and institutions other than white institutions to find capable and qualified mentors. During the mentoring implementation phase, plans should also address the necessity of mentors following up with mentees to determine their success in organizations. A database of all mentees with a comprehensive tracking program should be maintained.
7. That Executive Directors and upper level administrators undergo diversity workforce training. The Directors are the leaders of the organizations, and their messages and actions are directly communicated to the employees. If these individuals show no interest or pursue concerted diversity efforts from the top down, then a pursuit for a diverse workforce will be futile. They should also mandate diversity training for all employees with frequent refresher courses over the course of the employees employment tenure.
8. That Executive Directors collect and make readily available to employees and the public the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of their agency's workforce.
9. That agencies implement an employee mentoring and shadowing program for those interested in career advancement and cross training for promotional purposes.
10. Formalize an active partnership with the National Society of Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) and where applicable, the student chapter of MANRRS, national conferences. Regional and chapter meetings should be regularly attended to maximize recruitment efforts of minorities.
11. Send resource/agency appropriate individuals to career fairs that are capable of informing students of career opportunities in natural resources and also someone that explicitly understands the challenges and benefits of minorities in the natural resources professions.

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