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Natural Resource Access and Interracial Associations: Black and White Subsistence Fishing in the Mississippi Delta.*

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ABSTRACT Using qualitative data gathered over approximately twenty months, we examine how racial divisions between black and white fishers factor into access, harvesting strategies, and use of natural resources in subsistence fishing activities in the Mississippi Delta. Though both races engage in subsistence fishing for many of the same reasons -- a sense of autonomy and economic independence -- clear differences were manifest in their access, harvesting strategies, and utilization of the fish. We document these differences. We conclude that the social relations between white and black subsistence fishers, as they interact with and through the landscape, appear to perpetuate the characteristics of race relations in this region rather than redefine them.

Subsistence harvesting of natural resources persists in the Mississippi Delta (Brown, Xu, and Toth 1998). The rich natural resource base of the Delta is accessed extensively and in some cases intensively by local residents. Overt racial divisions which influence access to many resources and life-chances also persist in the Mississippi Delta (see

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Duncan 1999; Gray 1991; Cobb 1992; Marcum, Holley and Williams 1988; Brown et al. 2000). Yet the interaction between persistent racial divisions and subsistence harvesting in the Delta has not been explored. How do racial divisions factor into access, harvesting strategies, and utilization of these abundant natural resources? By examining aspects of one type of natural resource harvesting – subsistence fishing – in the Mississippi Delta, we can begin to address this question.

The Delta

Dirt, beautiful, rich, alluvial dirt --- “soil,” to those whose present trappings of luxury have relied on those who work the “dirt”--- makes the Delta one of the finest agricultural regions in the world. There is a definitive boundary to the Delta’s eastern side. The rolling hills melt downward into an abrupt plane that jets out in a perfectly flat line to the west. Demographically, the Delta remains characteristically behind the rest of America in almost all social and economic categories. The estimated median household income for the United States in 1988 was \$27,310, while in the Delta it was \$13,684 (U.S. Census 1994). Even more telling is that the median household income for blacks in the Mississippi Delta was only \$6,190. In the United States the percentage of families and individuals living below the poverty line in 1980 was 9.6 percent for families and 12.4 percent for individuals. For the Mississippi Delta, 30 percent of the families in this 17-county area live in poverty, as well as 46.9 percent of the individuals. The region has also experienced extreme population loss. Between 1940 and 1990, while the population for the United States as a whole increased 90.6 percent, the 17 counties of the Mississippi Delta experienced a 29.3 percent decline in population. Blacks constitute 59.7 percent of the Mississippi Delta population, well above the 1990 national average of 12.9 percent for the total U.S. population. When compared to other black-majority areas in the United States, the Delta has fared worse economically, primarily due to low educational attainment. “The 1990 U.S. Census showed that only 16 percent of adults there had achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 21 percent in other black-majority areas; 18 percent had completed less than the ninth grade, compared with 13 percent in other Black-majority counties” (Doyle 2000:30).

Social and political aspects of Delta life are also extreme. Duncan

(1999) found that generational life-chances and social and economic opportunities of Delta residents tended to be tied to one's recognition of, and willingness to participate in, an elite white patronage system. Failure to do so often closes opportunities for one's self and one's family members as well. Nylander (1998) found that identified white leaders, in the two rural Mississippi Delta communities he examined, neatly followed an elite power structure model (see Hunter 1953) while black leaders had a much more diffuse issue-oriented leadership structure more characteristic of Dahl's (1961) pluralistic model. Lyson (1988) notes that present-day Mississippi Delta economies were created by the rural white elites, and accordingly, economic development in the Delta is controlled to the degree that human development needs are kept to a minimum. Brown and Warner (1991) and Williams and Dill (1995) have suggested that this same rural white elite controls much of the behavior of blacks through financial dominance in banking, wholesale, and retail, and also through the legal, educational, and political life of the community (see also Gray 1991 and Duncan 1999). Nylander (1998) found that both the black and the white leaders in the two rural Mississippi Delta communities he examined agree that those who control the most highly-valued resources are the ones most likely to "get what they want" in the community; and land was the most valued local resource. He also found that black leaders were dependent on the white leaders who had more political power through their individual wealth and ownership of land in the community. White leaders often commented on the fact that because black leaders did not own land they had little say in local affairs.

Subsistence

Subsistence is an equivocal term that most often conjures images of "bare existence or a livelihood that only provides in minimal degree life's necessities. . . . [Thus], to the non-specialist, the term subsistence relates in important ways to an individual's economic and material circumstances. Studies by specialists, however, consistently stress that the importance of subsistence activities only in part relates to economic ends" (Freeman 1993:244-45). Freeman further states that "in subsistence societies it is the relations among people that wildlife harvesting generates and sustains, and not the relations between people and resources, that are of paramount importance" (Freeman 1993:245-

246). *Analyses of subsistence-oriented activities, therefore, reveal not only the relationship between people and natural resources, but the relations between groups of people as they interact through natural resources.*

Though most subsistence studies in the United States have focused on Alaska, the findings from these studies are remarkably similar to those from the few studies conducted in the lower forty-eight states (see Lichens 1977; Brash 1982; Rattner 1984; Gladwin and Butler 1982; Brown et al. 1998). Glass and Muth (1989) found that as capital investments increased in the regions they studied, subsistence activities did not necessarily decrease. "While subsistence was once perceived as isolated from the market economy, there is considerable interaction between monetary income and both capital and operating expenses in many subsistence activities" (p. 225). Specific to Mississippi, Bond (1994) claims that Mississippians have always been split between participation in the larger market economy and self-sufficient household production of foodstuff. Brown et al.'s (1998) findings also show that increased income was associated with both lifestyle and economic strategy dimensions of subsistence. They also found a significant inverse relationship between a minimal amount of income needed by a family to survive and increased participation in subsistence activities.

Emphasizing the social dimensions of subsistence, Freeman argues that it is not just a primitive economy; the role of subsistence takes on an overt social versus economic foundation:

Subsistence harvesting often persists when it is very expensive in monetary terms and in some cases, questionably cost-effective (Dahl 1989:35; Veltre and Veltre 1983:185-193). . . . This apparent economic irrationality becomes understandable when subsistence is understood as essentially reflecting those cultural values that socially integrate economic relations of particular groups of people into their daily lives and environment (Wenzel 1991:57). Securing social relationships becomes paramount. (Freeman 1993:245)

Therefore, to be sustainable, persons engaged in subsistence production must form and maintain particular social ties with other participants.

It is the participation and interaction that maintain the ties, not just expectations of an economic “pay-off.” The ties are based more on a notion of reciprocity than competition and they establish the expectations of participation for participants (Freeman 1993; Schneider 1982). In Mingione’s (1991) words:

Reciprocity is a type of social relation that only has meaning within an organizational system, because exchange is not concluded in a single act, transactions are potentially inequitable and the commitment to reciprocity is vague or, at most, implicit. For this reason, reciprocity refers to forms of social organization involving a varying but always limited number of individuals who, at the very least, know specifically of each other’s existence and engage in more or less frequent personal contact. (P. 25)

It is anticipated that the manner in which blacks and whites relate to the natural resource base in the Mississippi Delta will also reveal how they relate to each other through that resource base.

Clearly, activities imbued with strong cultural importance become enmeshed with other highly esteemed aspects of local culture. In the rural South generally, race, inequality, and religion inevitably become part of the natural resource utilization equation. Cowdrey (1983) claims that outdoor recreation and harvesting activities in the rural South have provided -- and continue to provide -- an outlet to maintain local social networks and identity development. Marks (1991) argues that outdoor activities in the rural South offer participants a greater sense of control over their lives and circumstances in an environment that is oftentimes oppressive. Finally, Ownby (1990) states that in the rural South, these activities are closely tied to religious themes and motives. Thus for many rural southerners, outdoor activities reinforce their intrinsic value as human beings, instill a sense of dignity in a larger environment that often denies it, and promote characteristics of political and economic independence. However, mutual suspicion between blacks and whites continues to foster racially segregated access to local natural resources (Marks 1991). Thus the harvesting of local natural resources should be a window to the maintenance of local social patterns of interaction. Consequently, though both whites and blacks may engage in activities for some of the same reasons – economic and political independence

and dignity – they may still perpetuate patterns of division among them.

Specific to the Delta, Jackson (1991) has demonstrated that the abundant fish and fisheries of the region have traditionally played a key role in local life patterns through subsistence harvests. Thus an analysis of subsistence fishing activities among segments of the black and white populations of the rural Mississippi Delta should shed additional light on social relations between the two groups.

Location and Methodological Techniques of the Study

We chose the upper Yazoo River basin of the Mississippi Delta for the study site because it contains five major tributaries that can be fished: the Coldwater River, Little Tallahatchie River, Tallahatchie River, Yalobusha River, and the Yocona River. The area is rich in water resources that are used for a variety of fishing activities (Jackson 1991; Brown, Toth and Jackson 1996). Qualitative data were collected from fieldwork in and around two rural communities located in this river basin. Both communities are under 2,500 in population, have majority black populations, and are characteristic of other Delta communities their size in this region in terms of racial and socioeconomic makeup. In the two communities' respective counties, the median household income was below \$16,000, with a poverty rate higher than 30 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1994). In 1990, unemployment levels for the two counties were 11.7 percent and 13.1 percent. In 1989, the per capita personal income for the two communities respective counties were \$9,561 and \$8,786.

The data consisted of observations of, and informal and semistructured interviews with, local fishers in the targeted towns and surrounding areas, and at various fishing sites. Discussions with residents at local business establishments that fishers frequent (e.g., bait and tackle shops) were also initiated. Between summer 1993 and spring 1995, 34 black fishers and 27 white fishers were interviewed. The age of these fishers ranged from a young man in his late teens to an elderly woman in her eighties.

Interviews were tape-recorded when informants allowed. In some cases only field notes were taken. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Analyses required multiple readings of the transcripts in order to identify common themes. Themes were

identified through words, sentences, or other pieces of information that constitute recurrent patterns in most, if not all subjects. These themes aid in focusing on important issues as the subjects themselves view them; the subjects are insiders who are more intimately aware of their surroundings than are the researchers. For example, the major themes explored in this paper include differences in access to the natural resource base, differences in harvesting patterns between blacks and whites, and differences in utilization patterns. These themes are intrinsic to the information provided by the subjects; we, the researchers, must identify possible themes, then code them according to concepts or easily remembered words (e.g., “distribution,” “credit systems,” “access,” etc.). In other words, we reconciled our understanding of an emerging larger story with each subject’s individual story. Each interview provided information that either enhanced or cast doubt on an emerging storyline. Depending on the severity of a doubt, coded themes were modified or even discarded as new evidence emerged.

Once themes were identified and coded, and we verified that they were consistent across the data, we further scrutinized them to identify subthemes (see Miles and Huberman 1994). For example, subthemes included: “credit systems through local merchants,” and “credit systems through peddlers.” With these data, the temptation is to paint a composite picture of the “typical” white and black subsistence fisher or a picture for all of the varieties of subsistence fishers in this region of the Mississippi Delta. However, we will present singular composites for the most intensive subsistence fishers we encountered for both the white and black populations. Specifically, we focus on differences between blacks who fish “off-the-banks” and whites who hold commercial licenses. Representative quotes are provided in the text to exemplify the themes we explore.

Economic and Social Benefits of White Subsistence Fishing: Holders of Commercial Licenses

In our investigations, we found that many of the white fishers we came across and/or were referred to by others as “people who fish a lot” hold commercial fishing licenses. They were also exclusively male. A commercial license allows them to use “commercial gear,” defined by the 1993 Mississippi Digest of Freshwater Commercial Fishing Laws

and Regulations as hoop or barrel net; slat basket; 1,000 feet of snag line; 3,000 feet or less of gill netting; 3,000 feet or less of trammel netting. A commercial license also allows them, if they desire, to sell fish. "A licenced commercial fisherman is considered to be a producer and is entitled by law to sell his own catch to anyone or at any point within or outside the state of Mississippi" (Mississippi Digest of Freshwater Commercial Fishing Laws and Regulations 1993:2). However, all but one of the "commercial" fishers we encountered were primarily interested in using the commercial gear to increase their catch for their own consumption needs. Thus they are mostly commercial fishers in name only. In this particular area of the Delta, none of our informants (white or black) were aware of any blacks who held a commercial license. Those we spoke to consistently estimated about 50 people in the area held a commercial license, estimating the typical cost for the license and the tags for their equipment to be around \$100 to \$150.

Personal Use

White commercial fishers in the area fish primarily to stock their own freezers. However, they often sell a portion of their catch throughout the three-month fishing period (March through July) to cover expenses, and give fish away as part of a loose network of reciprocity. Fish is a regular part of the white commercial fisher's diet, especially during the three-month fishing season. "I eat it everyday when I'm fishin'." "I usually eat fish twice a week." When we asked a local fish market owner about local fish consumption, he commented "Most everybody eats fish once a week. Piles of 'em eat it two to three times a week." Another fisher commented "During deer season, I eat deer four times a week and fish three times a week." All subjects estimated that, at a minimum, they (and their families) eat over 100 pounds of fish a year.

Filling their freezers was a common theme. One of the men we interviewed had four chest freezers in an outbuilding, each containing at least 30 cubic feet of room. All four freezers were full of fish, deer, and vegetables. "Like I say, we fill our freezers up. That will give us something where we will have some fish to eat in the winter. We try to sell enough to pay expenses. Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't." When we asked how much they store in their freezers, the following were common responses: "Probably several hundred pounds.

That's for fish fries and eatin' kind of things." "I usually put in my freezer about 200 pounds. What I put in my freezer they don't use for fish fries. I use it for my own family and friends if they want to buy some fish."

Many of these commercial fishers were worried about maintaining their source of fish, showing not just an economic, but cultural and social connection to the resource base. "We don't make a livin' off of it, but others do. If we had to replace it we couldn't. I mean, that's how we get it. If we lose the fish, we just lost ourselves. It couldn't be replaced." "Well I wish I'd never learned how to fish and hunt, I'd be a whole lot better off. Financially, I'd be way ahead."

Selling Fish

Three sources of fish sales by the commercial fishers were identified: 1) informal sale to friends and neighbors, 2) sale to local fish markets, and 3) sale on an established peddling route.

One fisher observed, "We don't make anything out of it. Pay expenses and repair. If a motor or somethin' tear down, you know, we'll have enough to pay for the motor." When asked who he sells fish to, the same fisher answered "Just anybody that wants it. Somebody always askin' us about it." He and others explained that they will sometimes stop their truck on the side of the road and sell the fish from the back. "When we need a little cash to pay for somethin', we'll get us a load. I got a box in the back of my truck; we'll put some fish in that box, and go round sellin' enough to pay for, like gettin' a motor fixed or what ever it needs." This fisher also explained that the surest way to get some cash from his fish was to sell them to a local market. He can usually sell about \$30 worth at a time. Another reported: "Don't sell anything on an established route. I don't. Somebody wants some around here we sell it to 'em. They know we fish all of the time. Some times they'll call the house."

Only one of the commercial fishers we interviewed still maintained a peddling route. The others said they did not peddle, because they would have to sell primarily to Blacks, illustrating an embedded racism among the white commercial fishers we interviewed. It also hints to a racial divide in the type of fish whites versus blacks desire. Indeed, we found that the most common fish consumed by blacks which were not caught by themselves was buffalo. It has been like this in the

Delta for a long time. In the memoirs of David L. Cohn from Greenville, Mississippi, (born in 1897) he opines:

Sometimes I visited a floating fish dock and watched fishermen remove 'buffalo' from fishboxes in the stream and, with deft movements of flying knives, dress them. On Saturdays they did a flourishing business with Negroes. Come in from the country on morning trains, many of them would go straight from the depot to the fish dock a mile a way, buy a big buffalo for four or five cents a pound, and run a wire through its gills. Then they would drag the fish after them on the sidewalk and from store to store as they did their tradin' until it was time to catch the late afternoon train. Negroes, probably because of diet deficiencies, had an almost passionate longing for fish. (Cobb 1995:99)

Every white fisher we spoke with identified buffalo as a "black fish." "Smartest thing is we throw them back into the lake. Most of the buffalo we throw back into the lake. You can't do nothin' with 'em. You would have to have an established sales route. And that's the only way you can get rid of 'em. But we throw 'em back." Those that they do keep they give (with carp occasionally as well) to friends to feed to their hunting dogs. "We got two or three folks who's got a lot of dogs and they cook it for their dogs. So we give it to them to cook for their dogs." One white commercial fisher told us surreptitiously that he actually preferred the taste of buffalo to catfish. The fact that it is a "black fish," however, keeps him quiet about his palate's preference.

Significantly, there is a real local demand for buffalo, but it is almost exclusively from the black community. Speaking with the one white commercial fisher who still maintains a peddling route, he notes that "I don't sell that many to whites. I've got a few white customers that want certain, well, yellow cats, they want certain kind of cats. . . . I sell [blacks] all through here fish. A lot of 'em buy 'em." He spoke of one black lady in the area that buys 200 to 300 pounds of buffalo, catfish, and drum (also considered a "black fish" by the whites) from him. "I've sold to her for years--well every since I've been fishing." He has been fishing in the area for over 60 years!

There are clear racial and social demarcations in the species of fish commercial fishers sell to locals. "The rich people like them

yellow cats. People like [names a prominent local person], I'm supposed to have him 200 pounds next week. All he wants is catfish. I sold him 200 pounds the week before last." Whites generally buy wild-caught fish (versus the more readily available, and cheaper, farm-raised) in large quantities for celebrations (e.g., fish fries), with a preference for flathead ("yellow") catfish. Blacks appear to access these wild-caught fish in three distinct ways: 1) buying fish from a peddler (who is usually white) for their daily consumption—they typically do not put them in a freezer; 2) buying them from fish markets in nearby larger towns; and 3) selling them to those who are returning home from other areas of the country for a visit who take, at times, several hundred pounds of frozen fish back with them. One person we encountered returns from Chicago every summer and buys around 200 pounds of yellow catfish. He freezes the fish at the local Piggly-Wiggly grocery store before taking them back to Chicago with him in a cooler. Though we did not witness others doing this, reports were that it is a common practice.

In an effort to see who accesses the wild-caught fish through fish markets, we had the owner of the only local fish market (now defunct) keep track of all the fish bought and sold through his market. He agreed to track fish purchases and sales from May 31 through June 16, 1993. During this period, 367 pounds of fish were bought and sold through the market. All of the fish came from White commercial fishermen and, without exception, were sold the same day they were purchased. Fish were available for sale only eight days during this period. The smallest quantity of fish bought was 20- lb, which was bought in the rough. If dressed out, the price would be \$2.50 a pound (an 11-pound fish dresses out to approximately 7.5 pounds).

We also kept track of who bought the fish. All buyers were white. The cheapest purchase was \$30, because one pound of fish sold for \$1.50 in the rough (20- lb at \$1.50). The total dollar amount of fish sold during this period was \$475.50. These people bought the fish for fish fries. Subjects stated it was for events like the Fourth of July, family reunions, or "just for the hell of it." Consequently, fish bought through this and other fish markets were not going into freezers or directly to a dinner plate. The wild-caught fish, to this segment of the population, has taken on a celebrity status to be used for special occasions only. Though a certain subset of the population still prefers the taste of the wild-caught fish over that of farm-raised, increasingly,

we found, they are willing to settle for the farm-raised fish for everyday use. But, again, when it comes to celebrating, whites still seek the wild-caught fish.

Fishers who fished as their primary occupation reported that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, they could no longer secure a living by fishing. When they were fishing for a living, these fishermen typically “ran” over 50 nets (gill and hoop), 25 a day on alternating days, in various spots in local rivers and lakes. Now, local commercial fishers run an average of 11 nets two or three times a week. Twenty years ago, they had established marketing/peddling routes that often extended to Memphis. The one commercial fisherman who still fishes all year long and maintains a peddling route in the local area was 73 years old at the time of these interviews and had been fishing for a living since he was seventeen. His route covers approximately 70 miles round-trip from his house and includes approximately 75 identified individual stops at private residences. He gets up at 4:30 a.m. to check his nets. The distance on the river where he sets his nets covers approximately five miles. He uses a grappling hook to retrieve the nets. Because of the turbid water, it is not possible to see more than a few inches into the water. On the four different occasions we accompanied him to collect nets, he rarely missed hooking an unseen net on the first try; he used no identifying marks on the banks to designate the location of his nets.

He placed the fish he caught in an old refrigerator laid on its back in his pickup truck bed. He used a 20-pound block of ice from home to chill the fish. The fisher would pull into the drive of “customers” (see Strasser 1989, for a discussion of the difference between customers and consumers) on his route and honk his horn. The resident of the house would typically respond by yelling through the screen door “What ya got?” The fisher would proceed to tell him/her what fish were available. If the customer was interested in the catch, the fisher would then weigh a fish and sell it to the person. Certain customers had standing orders for exotic fish/species like gar and snapping turtles. In this route, there are only two white families; the rest are black.

Social Standing and Giving Fish Away

Small commercial fishermen also gain social standing in the community through their activities. Fishers often donate fish for fish fries as fundraisers for volunteer fire departments, churches, etc. Fish fries also take

place spontaneously at various locations in the community. For example, during the fishing season, one fisher has a fish fry about twice a month or more at the local feed store, during which he supplies the fish, and other people provide the "grease," vegetables, and labor (peeling the vegetables). Fish fries are also, on occasion, prearranged. When business owners in the community are entertaining sales representatives or other people, a fish fry will often be arranged to feed them and to introduce them around to "the folks" of the community. "I'm talkin' about when you have different businessmen there, and they'd bring some associates from other places to eat. You know, if they have a business meetin', they'll go out there and eat all this [flathead catfish]. That's just a place for them to get together and talk. Business deals made and things like that. Regular business transactions." Interviewees stated that the fish are "always" donated, typically by the same few people--small commercial fishers.

Other times the fish fries are impromptu. "When we get back in, we'll cook fish there at that Shell station. Anybody comes up is welcome to eat, you know. It's just, we do it just--hell, we just like to do it. We feed strangers." The fisherman who holds fish fries at the feed store and Shell station appears to benefit from his social standing in the community. Residents of the community simply refer to him as the "fish-fry guy." For years he has donated fish to the local volunteer fire department fund-raiser fish-fry. In 1988 when the region was under severe drought conditions, brush fires were common and threatened many homes in the area. At that time, he lived in a 12 by 55 foot mobile home. His house was in the path of a brush fire which also threatened more affluent people's homes. The fire fighters left the other threatened areas and came to save his trailer.

They come out to the house a few years back. It got dry and we had a fire; it burned off the hills behind my house. They come over when it got close to the house, and stayed just about all night. They'd been up fighting it for about two days; and they sit over there and at the house all night. . . They just sat there and waited to see if anything goin' happen. Folks like, I mean, you can't put a price tag on. And not only that. Those boys will help you with anything; any kind of problem you got. Fish is all I can do for 'em, cuz I sure ain't got no money.

Despite the public nature of the event, never did we see blacks and whites mixing at a public fish fry --- planned or impromptu. All public fish fries we witnessed were attended by whites only.

Small commercial fishers also give fish away to friends, neighbors, older people, and the infirm. "Every week we give fish to somebody." This is particularly true for big fish--those over 30 or so pounds are difficult to sell whole or in pieces. As one fisher elaborated, "If you catch fish over 30, 35, 40 pounds, you might as well throw him back. And down there where I've fishin' we caught a lot of fishes up to 71 pounds. Most of the time I wind up skinning 'em and bagging 'em out and given 'em to a friend or what ever. I just enjoy fishin'." Some fishers seem to derive appreciable standing in the community through these activities as well. Besides social standing, this distribution of fish appears to have another function for some fishermen: It acts as an insurance policy. If they fall on rough times and need some social support, it's there.

Another way small commercial fishers garner social support is through the disposal of unwanted fish parts and unwanted species of fish caught in their nets. Guts of cleaned fish are often given to people who raise hogs. While no money changes hands, the fish serve other than a direct economic function. There were also several observed instances of exchange of fish for other food stuffs, such as vegetables. With several freezers full of fish, these fishers literally use fish as a credit account for "truck" to exchange for other items with a known trustworthy group of relations and friends (see Mingione 1991).

Daily Sustenance and Social Relations of Black Subsistence Fishers: Fishing from the Bank

Eating Fish and Giving it Away

Black fishers' approach and access to the local fishery resources differ from those of the white commercial fishers. Black subsistence fishers tend to be middle- to older-aged females who typically fish farm ponds, sloughs, and streams, and do not freeze hundreds of pounds of their surplus catch. Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of black subsistence fishers we observed is that they usually fish in a nearby resource (a farm pond, slough, etc.) for today's meal. The local game warden commented, "Most of your pole fishermen, that's what they do;

they use everything for meals.” It is not uncommon for them to freeze small amounts of fish, typically what will be consumed within the week. One woman stated, “I can eat fish at least twice a week if I can get hold of it. Fish and chicken is my main meal. I love it. I could eat it every day.” Another woman observed, “I can eat fish most every day. I believe I’d rather eat fish than chicken. I might eat it two days straight and put the rest in the deep freezer. The next day I might cook a mess of it again, until its done.” Another black woman told us “Lots of times we catch a lot of them, we just put ‘em in the freezer; and like on Sunday have a fish fry, stuff like that.” When we asked one woman how often she ate fish, she responded, “If I got it, at least three times a week.”

Black fishers fish heavily for crappie, perch and bream. The game warden commented, “Most of them like to fish the lake; they rather to catch that crappie than to have anything else.” Because crappie, perch and bream are game fish, a person cannot have over two days bag limit in their possession at any time (including freezers). This too, affects their consumption patterns. Unlike the white commercial fishers who eat catfish almost exclusively, which can be stored in unlimited amounts in their freezers, black fishers’ preference for these fish requires fishing for one or two days’ worth of meals at a time.

Black fishers often fish every day but Sunday, keeping anything larger than two inches. “Every day. Every day. I got some ladies that will be through here this morning. . . . They fish every day but Sunday.” Again, the game warden observed, “Most of the time what you got fishin’ during the week is blacks. I’d say 95 percent during the week is pole fishin’. They eat their [fish]. Like you say, they’ll take the whole family with ‘em. They’re gonna be eatin’.” If the fish are not consumed on the day of the catch, they are typically consumed shortly thereafter. One woman informed us that “I go and dress it, but I may not eat it that day. It may be the next day; it may be a week before I eat.” She also explained, “I go out and catch the number I want and I’m through.” Another woman explained she catches anywhere from 20 to 30 fish a day. Another reported: “Most of the time I go and catch about 15, I’m ready to go.” She explained that if she caught “a lot of them, we just put ‘em in the freezer; and like on a Sunday have a fish fry, stuff like that. Get up under the shade tree and just cook fish.” The first woman quoted above keeps most for her immediate family and gives any surplus away to extended family and neighbors. This same

woman works at one of the local farm-raised catfish processing plants. Another woman said, "We share it with my family, and then, sometimes, if we're gonna have fish for supper, I end up calling somebody else to eat fish with us. I got some neighbors. He loves greens; he loves chicken dumplings; fish and stuff like that. Whenever I have fish, I holler at him; and he comes and eats supper with us." When we asked another woman if she ever gave any of her catch away, she responded, "Sometimes. Like, if my mother-in-law is around, I may give her a mess or something like that. But I mostly keep what I catch." This was a common theme. Though we found some who did not fit this description, the majority of black fishers we interviewed give some fish to close friends and family, but only when they have more than their immediate needs. When asked if she gave any fish away, one woman responded, "No. Like I said, I'm not that big a fisherman. . . . When I fry the fish, any body come through the kitchen is welcome to it. People outside the household might not get any. I don't spread it out." When asked if she received fish from others, the same women commented, "Yeah. Neighbors down the road have given me crappie, have given me grinna. . . . It's kind of a once in a while thing. They know I like fish, so they see me and they got some, they ask me if I want some."

Another woman commented, "We eat off of fish for two or three days. My sister (visiting from Chicago) didn't want nothin' but fish. She got up every day and that's what she cooked." She explained that her sister took two five gallon buckets of frozen fish pieces back to Chicago with her when she left. This too was a common theme. The fish market owner observed, "I've sold fish when they come home for a funeral or something like that; before they go back to Chicago or Detroit or wherever they go, they fill them up a cooler of fish and carry it back with them." Speaking about one such man, he said, "I sold him 300 pounds to carry back to California. He froze them."

Cane Poles and Local Access

As mentioned, we did not find or hear of any black fishers who used commercial gear. With few exceptions, black fishers use low-cost cane poles or old spin cast rods and reels. The game warden observed, "Most of your reel and rod fishers come here from somewhere else." Though simple in the extreme, the gear and its use by the black

subsistence fisher is layered in many levels of knowledge and cultural experience with the local natural resource base (see Toth and Brown 1997). The cane pole is symbolic of, and has simultaneously grown-up with, what access blacks have traditionally had with the fishery resources. It is the ideal technology for fishing small ponds, streamlets, and sloughs. It can be poked and prodded into small places out of reach for “casting” or covered with overgrowth. It can also be used to “jig” along banks. It is a very efficient tool for what it is designed for and a very ineffective tool for other uses (for example, casting into a lake or river). The local game warden confirmed our observations when he commented, “Most of the ones that fish every day, cane polers and such, fish these little lakes and stuff.”

Research on fishing and the type of equipment used has found a linear progression from “basic” or simple equipment (e.g., cane pole) to “advanced” gear (e.g., fly rod) (see Hobson 1977). Such a progression assumes that recreational fishers seek to improve the quality and visibility of their equipment, in an attempt to legitimate their status as a “good fisher” or “expert fisher.” The type, supposed quality, and expense of the equipment are symbolic of the worth of the person as a fisher. “Posers,” those who wish to be identified and legitimated as avid fishers but lack the skills, display the symbols in an effort to be legitimated as fishers. (For a discussion on the role of material symbols in establishing status and the “fraudulent” use of them by some, see Goffman 1951; Form and Stone 1957; McCracken 1988; Baudrillard 1998.) Thus it is interesting that black subsistence fishers in this part of the Delta have remained committed to a simple technology that is highly effective, readably accessible, and inexpensive – the cane pole. The reason is in the motivation for the activity--recreation versus subsistence. There can be no mistaking that, unlike the recreational fishers discussed by Hobson (1977), these black subsistence fishers are recognized and legitimated by those who matter most – family, close friends, and neighbors – through their utilitarian success in securing fish, not through the symbols they display to others. They do not try to legitimize their status to an anonymous audience. No skills, no food. So if the cane pole works best in securing fish to eat, trade, and give away, we should not expect significant progression in the fishing gear because the gear serves a very different role to the subsistence fisher than to the recreational fisher.

Only 15 to 20 years ago, many of cane poles were self-made. One

middle-aged black male described his experience as a young boy when he went along with his father and grandfather to cut cane in nearby canebrakes, dug up their own worms, and caught their own minnows for bait. When we asked why he no longer makes his own gear, he paused and then said that now it is just easier and cheaper to buy equipment. Today, cane poles are typically purchased at local five and dime stores, as are various baits. Indeed, there is a large availability of cheap cane poles and tackle in the area.

Posted land. The highly specialized nature of the cane pole, however, has created some unanticipated problems for black subsistence fishers. All black fishers we spoke with noted they could no longer access certain places they had previously fished because the land had been “posted”—marked as no trespassing. Most black fishers preferred to fish small ponds with cane poles within walking distance of their homes (see Brown et al. 1996). No one we interviewed owned the land on which they preferred to fish. Thomas, Adams, and Thigpen (1994:55) note that “private landowners control access to almost 95 percent of the land in the rural South (Knowles 1989; White 1987).” In the not-too-recent-past, black fishers had long-standing social arrangements or agreements with predominately white land owners to access their land for fishing. Increasingly, such access has been redefined as social relationships changed from a normative cultural relationship to an economic relationship, based on negotiated exchange values; one pays a fee for access (see Raedeke, Rikoon, and Bradley 1994). This has effectively forced the low-income black fishers to larger and more distant public lakes and, to a lesser extent, rivers.

Providing access to private land is a social act that reflects the nature of existing relationships of a particular area. In the absence of lease hunting, the process of allowing entrance onto private land is deeply embedded with local cultural meaning and reflects landowners’ existing social networks. . . . Issues pertaining to social status, familial relations, and regulating the access to culturally significant resources are thus revealed in the process of providing privilege to those on the inside of cultural boundaries.” (Raedeke et al. 1994:9)

Small farm ponds in the Delta had been relatively accessible in

the past both physically and socially for black fishers. Yet this accessibility has been determined historically by criteria set by the white landowners, not the black tenants. Citing Smith's description of the social patterns of fishing among blacks that developed in the Delta, a simple deconstruction of these patterns illustrates how the white planters maintained control over access and time of access to local fishing sites, influencing current fishing patterns among black fishers:

Fishing was something else again. Poles were always available in some near-by cane thicket. Lines and hooks might cost a few cents, but they were long enduring, just as worms and crickets were ever available for bait. There was hardly a tenant's cotton patch in the whole Delta not within easy walking distance of some place to fish. If no actual river or lake was nearby, there was a bayou or slough certain to contain some catfish. . . . but the sportsman probably knows nothing of the need of a Negro farm wife to have some meat on the table for supper. . . . Fish were food, but even Delta fish bite only in spells. The close-riding planter who would let the tenant wives leave the fields for a few hours' fishing found morale problems reduced. . . . Wet days could be fishing days, but if the riding boss was on the job, the tenant and all the working members of his family needed to be in the fields from before daylight until after dark. (1954:193-4)

Low-income blacks in the Delta developed fishing patterns that often centered on the exploitation of fishing sites within walking distance. Consequently, the trend in posting land has reduced local fishing opportunities and altered traditional household patterns, especially for women. "People would rather fish close to home than go maybe 30 miles to fish [in a public lake]. Fishing closer to home is more convenient to the family. Suppose you had some young kids, and you know how young kids are; sometimes you have to go back home with them. If you're close you don't have too far to go. But carry a kid 30, 40 miles is inconvenient," said a middle-aged black woman, illustrating many issues in black subsistence fishing in the Delta. It is primarily women who are engaged in the activity. Because they are

the primary care-givers in their families, they oftentimes take the family with them on fishing trips. They see fishing more as utilitarian than recreational, though they generally enjoy fishing. These findings are supported by Brown et al. (1996). In a general randomized survey of this same region, they found that for active black fishers “the person most responsible for teaching you to fish” is the mother, whereas for whites it is the father. Additionally, they found that the modal response for both blacks (33 percent) and whites (27 percent) on preferred fishing sites was ponds. Finally, another interesting finding that supports our observations was that 79 percent of blacks preferred to fish from the bank and only 16 percent preferred a boat. For the white respondents, 71 percent also preferred the banks but 25 percent preferred boats.

Traditionally, women were able to walk to a fishing site and catch an evening’s meal; now, they must often postpone their fishing outings because they may lack transportation and must rely on other family and friends to take them to fishing sites, or arrange for others to watch their children if they do not want to bring them with them. Again, the criteria set by white landholders continue to influence black subsistence fishers access to local fishery resources.

One fisher summed up this situation, “All the land around the water is posted. If you want to fish, you gotta go through his land. . . . We ain’t in their fields. But you go down there, and you know how folks are; they got all the sense, and we ain’t got none. As long you don’t hurt the property, they ain’t supposed to be able to tell you.” An elderly male fisher deplored the fact that “I haven’t been to any ponds. Most of them got their ponds posted. It knocks out a lot of fish places. Lot of these little lakes, you know, they got posted signs on them. You have to go to these big places like Grenada dam, you know out that way. Most of the time you drive down these country roads, you see posted signs.” Another male fisher noted, “Just about every place now is posted, and you gotta catch up with the people to go through their land to fish. If you don’t go to Enid or Sardis [two large public access lakes in the area], ain’t too much fishing you can do. There’s one lake up here coming off the river you can fish in. But all these small lakes now, most people got ‘em posted.” A female fisher observed that, “For a while you couldn’t fish anywhere. Every place was posted. You couldn’t but drive in the middle of the road; every place on the side of the road was just posted.”

Switching to the public lakes also requires a new aspect of capital intensity as well as social obligations that did not exist in previous fishing patterns for low-income blacks — a car and its costs or reliance on others for transportation to a fishing spot. This development has not only affected pond fishing but other sites as well. A 67-year-old black female expressed that she loved to fish one of the rivers in the area many years ago, but that much of the land around it has been posted. "It ain't nowhere now where you can fish in that river unless you go way down and you're on somebody else's place. The last time I was back there, all that stuff was posted."

Finally, because the cane pole is specially suited for small bodies of water, having to move to the larger public lakes has affected the success of black fishers as well. They continue to use the cane pole even when its utility is greatly impaired in this context. When we asked people why they were using the cane poles at the lakes, they typically said that the reason they were on the lakes is because they had been "bumped" from private ponds. They too recognized the relative ineffectiveness of their equipment in that setting, but did not switch to other gear because they saw their current predicament (fishing on the lakes) as temporary. In other words, some still access the private ponds even when they are posted and move to the lakes only if they are "bumped" from the private land.

Conclusions

Race and Issues of Access

Land posting is perhaps the biggest issue of access, especially for black subsistence fishers whose fishing technology and cultural patterns have developed around small ponds that are within walking distance. Some of the consequences of being "bumped" from these sites are discussed below.

Kirby (1987) argues that southern whites have historically restricted blacks from accessing the rivers, which were the domain of whites. Our observations shows that blacks still access the river far less than do whites. The local game warden also commented that black fishers "don't use the river as much as they do the lake. They use the lake most of the time." In August (1993), from the 13th to the 31st, he also counted those who were fishing in the area's public access lakes

and rivers, observing race. In all, 492 blacks and only 139 whites were observed. Though he did not differentiate in his data collection between observations on the rivers and on the lakes, he informed us that the majority of blacks observed were indeed on the lakes. As a result, in many places in the South, blacks have developed limited experience and knowledge of river resources and how to exploit them. Specifically, because blacks in the Delta have had limited access to the local rivers, they have developed only a marginal little river fishing culture. It is only now, as they are being bumped from ponds, and to a degree even the lakes, that blacks are beginning to fish the few accessible areas on the rivers. The warden also told us that those blacks who do fish the rivers usually start at the lakes and end up at the rivers, because they get bumped from the overcrowded lakes or cannot access other posted land. "There's just too many people on the lake, and they'll come down here [to the river]."

Another interesting issue of race and access is how blacks and whites depend on each other for access to certain resources (money for the whites and buffalo fish for the blacks). Fishers rarely catch buffalo on a line. They are typically caught in nets in the lakes and rivers. Yet, as mentioned, buffalo are considered a "black fish." Also, we found no blacks fishing with commercial gear. Consequently, local blacks must buy buffalo from white commercial fishers either through markets or peddlers. Whites who are willing to sell buffalo know that their clientele will be almost exclusively blacks. Whites who are not willing to interact with blacks in this type of a relationship simply throw buffalo back when they catch them or give them to friends with hunting dogs; and their give-away contacts are usually white neighbors, family or friends. Moreover, selling fish in this region often requires granting credit lines. The one fisher who still maintains his route argues it would not be possible to sell to the blacks without granting credit.

Clearly, access issues to the natural resource base and race are also closely related to harvesting strategies and race.

Race and harvesting strategies. "Things also tell us who we are, not in words, but by embodying our intentions. . . . The tools of one's trade, perhaps more than any other set of objects help to define who we are as individuals" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 91-2). Or as Campbell (1995:109) aptly states, "It is possible to discern the significance which possessions play in socialization and the development of the self; how they can function as symbolic expressions

of an individual's identity; as well as something about the socio-demographic differentiation in evaluating material objects." The differences in the harvesting tools white and black subsistence fishers use could not be more stark. White subsistence fishers use primarily commercial gear that consists of costly nets (a hoop net is estimated to cost about \$100 with a \$5 licencing tag), boats, trailers, and trucks to deploy them. The typical black subsistence fisher on the other hand, has a cane-pole and a five-gallon bucket. The differences in the tools are in many respects a product of the region's history and the development of distinct fishing cultures. With their cane poles, blacks use a day-by-day harvesting strategy that allows them to put fish on the table, keeping only small amounts for later use. In most cases, later use also means within the same week. The most fish any of our cane-pole fishing contacts claimed to catch in a given trip was 30 fish. They typically catch perch, bream, crappie, and channel catfish. Because the first three of these species are generally not large fish, once they are filleted, 30 fish dress out to an amount that could be consumed in a matter of days.

Whites, on the other hand, because of their traditional access to the rivers and lakes through their commercial gear, can harvest larger fish in larger quantities. They tend to fish seasonally when the fish are "running," in the months of March through July. They fish specifically for large catches and store it in bulk in their freezers.

The power of self-identification through the material objects – the tools – we use is strong. Even a cursory scan of census data confirms that some blacks in the Delta could afford to run commercial gear; yet in the area we studied none did. Local fishers identified with the tools they used and the type of harvesting the tools allowed.

Utilization

Both the white and black subsistence fishers we observed treat fish primarily as a food source. It is, however, not the only way fish are used.

Food security. Harvey (1993) argues that as regions with little human capital potential are caught into the larger global economy, they tend to occupy the lowest rungs of the economic chain. It is from the ranks of the secondary labor force, the unskilled, where the rolls of the poor are kept. These people constitute the vast reserve of spare labor

to be used only in times of great need. In the meantime, they must keep themselves alive. This often requires the adoption of seasonal and unprotected work. Thus, such people are particularly subject to economic uncertainty. The 1990 unemployment level for the two study counties were 13.1 percent and 11.7 percent. The employment opportunities that do exist are highly concentrated in agricultural labor and service-sector jobs, both of which are low-paying and highly subject to market fluctuations. As Harvey (1993:24) explains, "The economic life of impoverished households is a roller coaster ride between peaks of feasts and valleys of famine. . . . Thus the impoverished cannot treat their niche as a taken-for-granted fact of everyday life. . . . [They] must devise ways to ride out or otherwise neutralize its unpredictable nature."

Subsistence fishing has traditionally provided such a mechanism for riding out volatile market fluctuations for some people in the Delta (see Brown et al. 1998). In an area rich in natural resources, it makes sense that subsistence activities should become an important part of economically-marginal people's lives. Fish in this context, provides a stable, inexpensive, accessible, and desirable food source all year round for both whites and blacks, but in different ways — whites freeze hundreds of pounds of bulk fish, and blacks eat and freeze enough for today and tomorrow. Yet, as noted earlier by Freeman (1993), subsistence is primarily a social versus an economic system. Our findings reflect the importance of these activities as an indicator of social relationships as well.

Social contact. While considerable residential and social divisions persist, fishing may act to bridge some of the divide between whites and blacks, if only briefly. For example, the capture and consumption of certain fish (e.g., buffalo and flathead catfish) bring blacks and whites into contact with each other in at least two ways. First, though posting has become a major issue, blacks still fish private property intensively, because the fishing culture and gear they have developed over time are well suited for the type of fishing available on private lands—farm ponds, small streams, sloughs, etc. Whites still own most of the private lands of the Delta and control its access (see Duncan 1999). Accessing fish from these sites stems from long-standing social relationships between white and black families. Second, the buffalo fish, predominantly eaten by blacks in the Delta, is caught almost exclusively by white commercial fishers. For the white fisher to sell

his fish to the black community, he must either sell it to a fish market, which then sells it to black *consumers* or he must sell it to the black *customer* himself. Strasser (1989) distinguishes between *customers* – those who have a social relationship of (perhaps guarded) trust and whose relationship is less formal and more intimate – and *consumers* – those who have only a formal economic relationship. This conceptual difference seems to fit well here. Thus, for the most part, fishing appears to bring the two races closer together socially, but the organization and content of these ties are weak at best as economic considerations are the most significant connections shared by black and white fishers.

Social status and security. White commercial fishers garner social status and security through their subsistence fishing activities by their giving away fish (to the infirm, neighbors etc.), and providing services like fund-raisers (the volunteer fire department fish fries) and chamber of commerce functions (fish fries for visiting business people). These activities allow the white commercial fisher to obtain goods and services he might not be able otherwise to “afford,” while giving him an identity in the larger community.

The black fishers share their surplus with a narrowly-defined circle of family or close neighbors. Consequently, they may not hold the same overarching status and security that many of the white commercial fishers seem to have in the larger community. They do have such status, however, within their own family. This is consistent with the discussion of their use of cane poles; the main audience from whom they seek legitimation is the one they serve through their fishing abilities and activities—their families. The circle is not, and probably cannot (because of the capture of far less fish than the white commercial fisher for all the reasons listed above) be, wider than a few close associates. Yet within this group, clearly the giving of fish is practiced and appreciated. Black subsistence fishing helps maintain the centrality of family in the black community.

Subsistence fishing in this region of the Mississippi Delta is symptomatic of the complexity of race relations in the area. To gain access to valuable resources available through the local natural resource base, whites and blacks must interact in a variety of ways. That interaction, however, generally appears to reinforce the relative power and influence of whites in blacks’ lives and activities (see Duncan 1999 and Gray 1991). This is clearly demonstrated in three areas: 1) the

limited access to posted land and the consequent inefficient use of the cane pole fishers' technology, time, and cultural resources when they are forced to fish the public lakes and rivers; 2) limited access to the rivers and the ability to exploit their abundant resources (river fishing requires specialized gear and licensing which the black fishers have not pursued); 3) certain types of fish preferred by blacks (buffalo and flathead catfish) are almost exclusively provided by white fishers. Consequently, black clients must rely on the willingness of whites to sell to them or trust them enough to grant them credit to buy. In our time in the field, we found only one white commercial fisher who was willing to do that on a "customer" basis. Other whites are willing to interact economically and indirectly by treating blacks as "consumers." They sell their catch of buffalo to local fish markets, but they are not willing to extend their social interaction – giving away of fish, selling of fish, and so on – directly into the black community.

Subsistence access and use of natural resources, because they are primarily socially based (Freeman 1993), are key to understanding the dynamic relations between those who engage in these activities. As Greider and Garkovich (1994:2) note, "meanings are not inherent in the nature of things. Instead, the symbols and meanings that comprise landscapes reflect what people in cultural groups define to be proper and improper relations among themselves and between themselves and the physical environment." Subsistence activities among and between the white and black populations in the Mississippi Delta have been imbued with cultural meanings that appear to perpetuate, not redefine, the characteristics of race relations in this region. Our findings illustrate the complexity of subsistence living and the importance of intra-community diversity in shaping natural resource use.

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