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Sustaining Georgetown County, South Carolina: A Museum Approach

Jesse Morgan

SUST 310: Methods/Tools in Sustainability

April 11th, 2022

#### Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations launched: Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, describing it as a plan of action, for people, planet, and prosperity.<sup>1</sup> The UN created 17 total goals set to redefine how the global community should work. Targeting issues such as poverty, environmental protection, and quality of life. This report takes the ideas of sustainability developed by the UN and applies them to Georgetown County, South Carolina. Specifically focusing on Goal 4: Quality Education, and Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

## **Relation to Organization and SDGs**

Georgetown RISE: Resilience, Innovation, Sustainability, and Education, is partnered with United Nations Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development. The students within this program were given internship positions in Georgetown County, SC. The goal was to allow students to receive hands on experience in the workplace while also working on sustaining the county within their field.

I was placed in the South Carolina Maritime Museum to contribute to an upcoming exhibit called *Across Time and Many Waters*, which aims to highlight the contributions African Americans have given to the area. In this paper I will be specifically discussing Sustainability Goals 4, Quality Education, and 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, with targets 4.7 and 11.4 and their relation to my internship. Target 4.7 states: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Sustainable Development Goals: United Nations Development Programme," in UNDP, (n.d.).

gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. Target 11.4 states: Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

The very notion of culture as an enabler of sustainable development should ultimately involve the adoption of a cultural approach, or the understanding of cultural contexts, by all stakeholders involved in sustainable development, including in particular those that do not work directly in the cultural sector, e.g. professionals, organizations and other agents in the fields of education, health, community participation, economic development, environment, etc.<sup>2</sup> The need for a cultural approach to development was reinforced at the 1982 UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies. The conference found that development must be founded on the will of each society and express its profound identity.<sup>3</sup>

#### Thesis

The exhibit, *Across Time and Many Waters*, educates visitors, creates awareness for underrepresented African American communities in Georgetown County, and broadens the narrative period from colonial to present day, expanding the maritime-related African American histories in the county.

#### **County Overview**

By 1729 the area around the City of Georgetown, which would later become Georgetown County, was already home to a busy seaport. Georgetown, which is the county seat, is the state's third oldest city.<sup>4</sup> Historically Georgetown County was home to plantations,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "UNESCO's Work on Culture and Sustainable Development Evaluation of a Policy Theme," in UNESCO Digital Library, (November, 2015), 76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "UNESCO's Work on Culture and Sustainable Development Evaluation of a Policy Theme," in UNESCO Digital Library, (November, 2015), 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "History," in Georgetown County, SC, (n.d.).

shipping rice, indigo, and cotton to other parts of the world. By 1840, Georgetown was the leader in the United States rice industry producing almost half of the country's crop.<sup>5</sup> This was possible because of slave labor, where some of the largest slave-holding plantations in the South were along the Waccamaw River, averaging 200 to 500 slaves each.<sup>6</sup> After the slaves were emancipated following the American Civil War, many opted to remain in Georgetown County where their rich culture and history flourished. The county is home to hundreds of historic sites and houses including Atalaya Castle, Brookgreen Gardens, and Hobcaw Barony,<sup>7</sup> all of which are now former plantations from the county's golden age of rice. This research seeks to use the history of Georgetown to create the exhibit, *Across Time and Many Waters*, and highlight the influences African Americans have made on the county.

#### **Literature Review**

Previous research indicates that a museum's ability to reach cultural sustainability is influenced by components of their social and economic performance, while environmental behavior proved to be insignificant.<sup>8</sup> A study on 86 Romanian museums revealed that cultural sustainability is important to keeping the natural, social, and economic environment intact. If the culture of a society disintegrates, so will all its other components.<sup>9</sup> The findings of this study showed that a museums' effectiveness and performance, openness to the public, and heritage exposure have a positive impact on cultural sustainability.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> "Cultural Resource Element," in Georgetown Comprehensive Plan, (2010), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> "Cultural Resource Element," 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> "Cultural Resource Element," 9-20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Izabela Luiza Pop et al, "Achieving Cultural Sustainability in Museums: A Step toward Sustainable Development," (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, (2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Pop, "Achieving Cultural Sustainability in Museums: A Step toward Sustainable Development."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Pop, "Achieving Cultural Sustainability in Museums: A Step toward Sustainable Development."

Likewise, another study found that culture in sustainable development can be classified into two sets. The first set being constituent interpretation, culture refers to a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms through which people perceive, interpret, or respond to actions and environments. Culture in this sense acts as a facilitator of or barrier to development by affecting human perceptions, actions, and achievements concerning sustainability.<sup>11</sup> The second set being functional interpretation which denotes the practice of culture through cultural production, consumption, and participation. In this definition, culture plays a role as a driver and enabler of development since the cultural and creative industries that produce cultural goods and services can generate growth, income, and employment.<sup>12</sup> This literature found that culture has vital implications across all 17 SDG Goals. Within the social dimension of the SDGs, culture is a factor in physical health and well-being. Culture also has an impact on resources to which women, the poor, and the vulnerable have access to. Within the environmental dimension, culture can explain the anthropogenic causes and affects interpretations and risk perceptions of, as well as human responses to, the environmental issues targeted by these SDGs.<sup>13</sup> Within the economic division, culture can explain why some individuals and nations succeed in economic prosperity while others fail to achieve it.<sup>14</sup> Culture also plays roles in determining economic plans such as financial aid programs, stimulus plans, and trade openness. Understandings of the economic dimension are dominated by the modernization theory, which predicts socioeconomic development, including urbanization, industrialization, technology innovation, and economic globalization, accompany changes in norms and values.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Xinzhu Zheng et al, "Consideration of Culture Is Vital If We Are to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals," in *One Earth*, Cell Press, (2021).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Zheng, "Consideration of Culture Is Vital If We Are to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Zheng, "Consideration of Culture Is Vital If We Are to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Zheng, "Consideration of Culture Is Vital If We Are to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Zheng, "Consideration of Culture Is Vital If We Are to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

Another study on using oral history in museums, a maritime museum exhibit on the Morecambe fishing community, revealed that the oral history had a double role. The interviews created a link to the Morecambe, the displays were created around what the interviewees said, and local visitors could respond to displays in other ways than just observation. The second role of the oral history was that it created an interpretive tool for the visitor who has no contact with fishing experience.<sup>16</sup> Hearing the accents, vocabulary, and stories used by the Morecambe community emphasize the culture the Morecambe people have. Oral history can expand the interpretive process even further. When the interviewee is speaking about her or his life experience; when the listener responds to a common experience; when the interviewer is making the tapes—all of these people are *engaging* in history.<sup>17</sup> The tapes created gave highly accurate information, emphasis to the displays, and preserved the stories of the Morecambe culture.

Lastly, Gullah Geechee people of today are descendants of enslaved Africans from various ethnic groups of west and central Africa who were brought to the New World and forced to work on the plantations of coastal South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida.<sup>18</sup> Being located on the coastal Sea Islands of the Lowcountry allowed for protection from outsiders and strong sense of family and community, Gullah/Geechee people maintained a separate creole language and developed a distinct culture, which included more of the African cultural tradition than in the cultural patterns of African American populations in other parts of the United States.<sup>19</sup> However, due to economic development, fishing regulations, and other changes over the last few decades, the Gullah Geechee communities have had no other choice but to leave

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>April Whincop, "Using Oral History in Museum Displays, in *Oral History Society*, (JSTOR 1986), 47."
<sup>17</sup> Whincop, "Using Oral History in Museum Displays, 48."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> "Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement," in *National Park Service*, (NPS Southeast Regional Office, 2005,) 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> "Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement," 13.

their ancestral lands. The remaining communities have become models for understanding negative as well as positive impacts of burgeoning tourism and large-scale economic development in coastal regions of the American South. Despite the losses of recent decades, the Gullah/Geechee people remain a testament to the power of human adaptability and survival amid major stresses and assaults from many fronts in the rapidly changing economic environment of the modern world.<sup>20</sup>

## **Empirical Data Analysis**

*Across Time and Many Waters* highlights the preservation of African American and Gullah Geechee culture such as the conservation of Sandy Island. About 50 people live on Sandy Island now, all descended slaves brought from West Africa to cultivate rice on nearby plantations.<sup>21</sup> This number has gone down significantly in recent years as there were approximately 120 residents on Sandy Island back in 2011.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that the majority of the island is now owned by the State of South Carolina and protected from development. Sandy Island was once home to 1,100 acres of plantations along the Waccamaw River in the 1800's and began the first wave of land ownership for African American Sandy Islanders.<sup>23</sup> The people on Sandy Island have lived there for generations and their heritage still lives on the island today. Protecting and preserving the Gullah-Geechee culture is imperative as the decline of residents on Sandy Island increases.

During this research, interviews with experts on Gullah Geechee were conducted. The most prominent topic the interviewees discussed was how vital the Gullah Geechee community is to the Lowcountry and the history of the United States. Interviewee #1 stated that, "you cannot

<sup>22</sup> "Cultural Resource Element," 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> "Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement," 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Christel Bell, "Secluded Sandy Island Deeply Rooted in Gullah Geechee Culture," in WMBF (2016).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> "Cultural Resource Element," 5.

separate Gullah, from our history in the United States, anymore than you can separate water from the ocean." During the era of slavery, the Sea Islands were largely responsible for growing rice, cotton, and indigo to other parts of the world. These crops, especially rice, were vital in the development of America. South Carolina's long-term commitment to the cultivation of rice on an industrial scale thus not only defined the economy, but also permanently shaped the demographic profile of the state."<sup>24</sup> Interviewee #2 says, "so then we see a re-emergence of Gullah Geechee Culture with emancipation. We see religious and spiritual traditions. A resurgence in food ways..." The traditions that Gullah Geechee brought to the Lowcountry have since extended and developed further beyond the 19 and 20th<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fishing techniques used by the Gullah Geechee community have allowed for canneries, bait shops, and restaurants to open across the coast. Gullah Geechee recipes often include slow cooked boiled seafood with rice, and other vegetables, all of which are a prominent and staple food in the Lowcountry.

The Gullah Geechee culture can be found in the corridor states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The potential leisure spend for the Gullah Geechee Corridor States is \$34B. This is based on travelers who have both indicated they would visit one of the Gullah Geechee sites asked about in the study and expressed interest in visiting African American heritage sites in the South.<sup>25</sup> The relative importance of African American culture in choice of a destination is high with 36% of all travelers ranking it either "very important" "somewhat important," and with African Americans (50%) and Millennials (49%) statistically more likely to say it has this level of importance.<sup>26</sup> Georgetown County is home to numerous

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Nic Butler, "Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Lowcountry Rice," (Charleston County Public Library, 2021).
<sup>25</sup> "2020 Report Market for Gullah Geechee Heritage Tourism." In Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor, (NCGrowth, 2020), 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> "2020 Report Market for Gullah Geechee Heritage Tourism," 13.

local parks and historic sites, which are highly sought after by travelers. Overall tourist awareness for Gullah Geechee was highest in Magnolia Plantation, in Charleston SC with 34%, but also significant at Brookgreen Gardens in Myrtle Beach at 26%, and the Rice Museum in Georgetown with 23%.<sup>27</sup>

With each visitor to the SC Maritime Museum, the exhibit and oral history will express preservation and educate those who view the exhibit on preserving the culture on Sandy Island. This preservation will also be emphasized for the South Carolina Sea Islands and Georgetown County African American Culture. This was similarly done in the Lancaster Maritime Museum in July 1985. The museum conducted oral history of the Morecambe fishing people. The article states that oral history focused people's attention on a specific issue related to the Morecambe fishing people.<sup>28</sup> This museum exhibit, similarly, wants to focus the attention on the significance of African American culture in Georgetown County. In doing so, SDG target 4.7 under Quality Education will be used effectively by supporting a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Communities that draw cultural tourists experience an additional boost of economic activity. Tourism industry research has repeatedly demonstrated that arts tourists stay longer and spend more than the average traveler. *Arts & Economic Prosperity IV* reflects those findings: 32 percent of attendees live outside the county in which the arts event took place, and their event-related spending is more than twice that of their local counterparts (nonlocal: \$39.96 vs. local:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> "2020 Report Market for Gullah Geechee Heritage Tourism," 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Whincop, "Using Oral History in Museum Displays, 48."

\$17.42).<sup>29</sup> Georgetown County's art and culture ranks first among its economic drivers, delivering three times the economic value compared to the state, more than its neighboring Horry County, and twice that of Charleston County, home of Myrtle Beach and Charleston, South Carolina respectively.<sup>30</sup> Georgetown's art and cultural assets are a jewel that can be uplifted and leveraged to deliver even more value for its residents, businesses, and government. Georgetown visitors are likely to spend the day: visit several sites, shop, have lunch, perhaps stay overnight. This translates into revenue for its museums and cultural sites, local businesses, and sales tax for its local government.<sup>31</sup> Travelers had very positive associations with the specifics of Gullah Geechee people including history/heritage, locale in the coastal region, unique language, historic contributions to the region's economy. These attributes are very positive and indicate areas of interest and opportunities for more education.<sup>32</sup>

As of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, approximately 30.4% of Georgetown's population is African American and 67.6% are White. A grand total of 63,404 people live in Georgetown County as of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.<sup>33</sup> For each additional person that visits Georgetown County and the SC Maritime Museum, the exhibit exposes them to African American culture in the county as well as their contributions and value to Georgetown as a whole. The SC Maritime Museum had a total of 17,846 visitors in 2021 alone during the COVID-19 pandemic. If this number continues to grow, or even remain at an average, roughly 18,000+ people will now be exposed to African American heritage in Georgetown County a year, with expectations for this number to grow depending on COVID-19 conditions. Exposure to a culture will in turn, help preserve it. Like any sector,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> "The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Culture ..., in *Arts and Economic Prosperity IV*, (Americans for the Arts, 2011), 2"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> "Georgetown County South Carolina Panel Report, in A ULI Advisory Services Panel Report, (ULI, 2016), 23."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> "Georgetown County South Carolina Panel Report, 23."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> "2020 Report Market for Gullah Geechee Heritage Tourism," 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts. In United States Census Bureau, (2021),"

culture has a part to play in bettering the world around us. Specifically, museums provide a platform for greater learning and greater thinking; education and consideration. The Museum Association says "The best museums use their position of trust to encourage people to reflect on society's contemporary challenges. They promote social justice and human rights, challenge prejudice and champion fairness and equality."<sup>34</sup> This specifically focuses on sustainability target 11.4, Sustainable Cities and Communities, which aims to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. Georgetown County has 7 museums, serving a population of 61,065 people in an area of 814 square miles. There is 1 Museum per 8,723 people, and 1 Museum per 116 square miles. In South Carolina, Georgetown County is ranked 3rd of 46 counties in Museums per capita, and 6th of 46 counties in Museums per square mile.<sup>35</sup> Combine this with tourist per year, nearly 15,000 annually,<sup>36</sup> and the potential for preserving African American culture, and discovery of new things about the culture will keep the heritage in the county going for years to come.

# **Room for Improvement**

Within this body of research there are many additional things to consider and test. For instance, the exhibit's longevity is unclear and the affects it may have overtime has not yet been documented. It will also be hard to get clear data on the impacts the exhibit may have on SDGs 4.7 and 11.4 without proper planning. Target 4.7 states: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Manual Charr, "Museums and Sustainable Development Goals. (Museum Next, 2022)"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> "Museums – Georgetown County, SC (Events and Exhibits), in County Office (n.d.)."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> "Georgetown County Chamber of Commerce's Visitors Center" (Georgetown County, n.d.).

of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. Target 11.4 states: Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. Perhaps a survey could be taken by museum visitors asking what they found most interesting or memorable about the exhibit. The SC Maritime Museum already offers hand-outs, scavenger hunts, and other related informational papers, so this is a possible way to receive feedback. The exposure the museum gets is also greatly dependent on Georgetown County's tourism industry.

With the exhibit currently immobile, the only coverage given is from tourists visiting, and word of mouth. To increase the exposure outside of Georgetown County, a traveling exhibit would be beneficial, as it will lead to exposure to other populations. Likewise, public access to the oral interviews taken over the course of the exhibit's creation would be a valuable educational resource and expose viewers to the Gullah Geechee culture. Providing scannable QR codes on panels or pamphlets directing visitors to Gullah Geechee lead websites, social medias, businesses, etc. will further help provide attention and support, and broaden the goals of *Across Time and Many Waters*. For the exhibit, having members in the Gullah Geechee community provide feedback before the official opening would be beneficial. This will allow time to make sure the Gullah Geechee culture is being represented how they would like to be represented and provide further information that would be important to their stories.

# Conclusions

Across Time and Many Waters teaches visitors of the museum the traditions of the local African American community within Georgetown County, South Carolina. In doing so, it preserves the way of life these people have lived for centuries. By learning about their contributions, culture, ideas, teachings, and skills, the culture can continue to be maintained through the people who engage with the exhibit. Visitors are not just learning history but

participating and contributing simply by listening and being a part of the oral history, the exhibit provides. This is a direct reflection on SDG 11.4, aiming to protect the world's cultural heritage. Without preserving heritage and one's culture, a community does not sustain itself. Culture enables development since the cultural and creative industries that produce cultural goods and services can generate growth, income, and employment.<sup>37</sup> This is especially important to Georgetown County, which has seen a high tourism rate in 2021 with an income of \$2.5 million in state accommodations tax numbers.<sup>38</sup> This also supports SDG 4.7, under Quality Education. The SC Maritime Museum aims to not only educate the public, but also provide tours and other sources for the school system. The exhibit specifically wants to highlight the positive contributions brought to the development of Georgetown County by the African American community and apply that as its driving educational factor. Applying these goals to Georgetown County will help development, which is a huge part of sustainability. These 17 SDG Goals cannot be met overnight and will take small achievements such as Across Time and Many Waters to meet the United Nation's End Goal to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Zheng, "Using Oral History in Museum Displays."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Amy Russo, "Georgetown County Sees Recording-Breaking Year for Tourism." (WCIV, 2021).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> "Sustainable Development Goals: United Nations Development Programme."

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