

Spring 4-2022

Social, Environmental and Economic Threats to Gullah Cultural Heritage in Georgetown: Sustainable Development Principles as Tools for Cultural Conservation

Brandon Peck
Coastal Carolina University, bppeck@coastal.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/goal-4-quality-education>



Part of the [Sustainability Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peck, Brandon, "Social, Environmental and Economic Threats to Gullah Cultural Heritage in Georgetown: Sustainable Development Principles as Tools for Cultural Conservation" (2022). *Goal 4: Quality Education*. 1.
<https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/goal-4-quality-education/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Georgetown RISE UN Youth Corps at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Goal 4: Quality Education by an authorized administrator of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.

Social, Environmental and Economic Threats to Gullah Cultural Heritage in Georgetown:

Sustainable Development Principles as Tools for Cultural Conservation

Brandon Peck

Dr. Martin

SUST 310

5/2/2022

Introduction

In this study, three separate issues impacting Gullah people and cultural heritage in Georgetown County are examined in tandem in order to show the interrelation that these issues have with each other. The three pillars of sustainable development are People, Planet and Prosperity. True sustainability cannot be reached until each pillar is accounted for. A holistic solution is necessary in order to properly address the issues related to the conservation of the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. Through the utilization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and with respect to the People-Planet-Prosperity approach, the interconnected issues can be addressed simultaneously.

Like many cultures found around the world, Gullah culture is incredibly rich and complex. Family ties, local food, and of course, basket weaving, are just a few of the important facets of Gullah culture. Arguably the most important tenant of Gullah identity is their connection with the land¹. Maintaining these sacred lands has become an increasingly tedious struggle for Gullah leaders in recent decades. Starting in the late 1930's, the Sea Islands in the coastal regions of South Carolina faced unprecedented amounts of development for the purpose of attracting white tourists and wealthy retirees.

However, encroachment by land developers is not the only threat to Gullah landscapes. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, applied at a local level, may go a long way in helping preserve the cultural heritage of the Gullah peoples of South Carolina. The low-lying

¹ Sharon Y. Fuller, "Indigenous Ontologies: Gullah Geechee Traditions and Cultural Practices of Abundance," *Human Ecology* 49, no. 2 (2021): pp. 121-129, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-021-00215-2>, 122.

lands and sea islands that Gullah people call home are incredibly susceptible to our changing climate and rising oceans. Hurricanes over the years have been particularly destructive to archaeological sites. The impact of these social and environmental changes mean Gullah people now are finding it harder to maintain their community ties and cultural identity.

Background to Gullah People in Georgetown County

The Waccamaw Neck and the South Carolina Sea Islands are historically productive agricultural lands where slave-based plantation agriculture was utilized for rice and indigo cultivation from the Sixteenth century onward. The communities of enslaved peoples in the South Carolina low country were primarily brought from the rice cultivating regions of West Africa, primarily Angola, Senegal, the Gambia and Sierra Leone². Following abolition, community and cultural ties were formed to these lands that their ancestors were once enslaved upon. Gullah-Geechee culture has its roots in both tragedy and innovation as Georgetown, Charleston and Beaufort counties were built off of the backs of enslaved Gullah peoples³. The nature of their agricultural work, and their similarity in background were just some of the reasons a unique culture was able to form out of this region following Emancipation.

Social Issues Regarding Gullah Identity and Practice

Historically, Gullah people felt that it was best that they hid their culture, foods, and dialect from their children in fear that they would be treated wrongfully. Now, we find that

² Sharon Y. Fuller, "Indigenous Ontologies: Gullah Geechee Traditions and Cultural Practices of Abundance," *Human Ecology* 49, no. 2 (2021): pp. 121-129, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-021-00215-2>, 121.

³ Sharon Y. Fuller, "Indigenous Ontologies: Gullah Geechee Traditions and Cultural Practices of Abundance," *Human Ecology* 49, no. 2 (2021): pp. 121-129, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-021-00215-2>, 121.

Gullah people are now struggling to reclaim their ancestry and identity as a result. Only in the year 2000, upon the establishment and recognition of the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, did Gullah-Geechee culture return to the public consciousness. This research utilizes *Life Histories*, an ethnographic interview method that uses unstructured questions to help the researcher gain an understanding of issues related to a specific culture, group or population. Several community members were approached to understand the ways in which they viewed their identity and what issues they face. Once the transcripts were completed, I used a thematic analysis in order to identify the most common codes, themes and issues that the interviewees brought up throughout their dialogue.

The most repeated point of interest among older subjects was the idea that their parents and grandparents wanted them to hide their Gullah culture while out in public. One respondent stated that they would often get glared at, or even smacked on the head if their mother heard them speaking Gullah outside of the house⁴. Younger subjects typically reported a greater interest or desire in wanting to learn about their heritage but not knowing how to. The younger subjects stated that their parents typically promoted the idea that they should be able to reclaim their identity. Young interviewees believed that it is getting harder to identify with their culture, and that they believe they have already been enculturated into the wider community. Many respondents stated that they felt there was a lack of awareness and knowledge of who Gullah people are outside of where they are from.

To understand how well represented the Gullah-Geechee people are among the larger community, a survey was conducted amongst thirty-nine students from Coastal Carolina

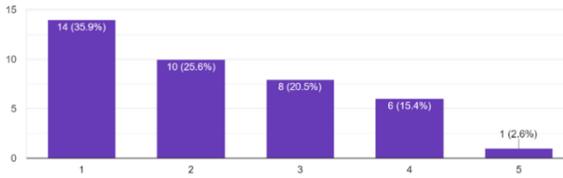
⁴ Interviews with anonymous participants, conducted in February and March of 2022.

University. The goal of this survey was to find out how aware these students were of Gullah people before and after they moved to Conway, SC. Two control questions were asked of the respondents, what state they were from and how they identified their race. On a linear scale from 1 to 5, one meaning no knowledge to five meaning complete understanding, the survey asked students to grade themselves on how much they knew about Gullah Geechee culture, history and issues. My hypothesis of this study was that students living in regions near the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor would score highly on their understanding of Gullah-Geechee.

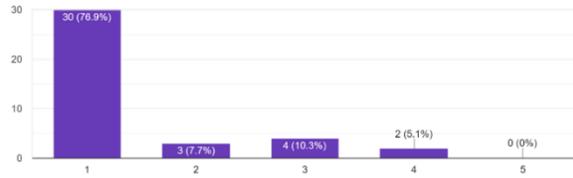
The findings of this survey can lead us to a handful of different conclusions. According to the results, 76% of respondents stated that they were completely unaware of the existence of Gullah-Geechee prior to coming to Coastal Carolina University. This number decreased to 33.3% when the respondent was asked about how much they knew about Gullah-Geechee prior to taking the survey. This tells us Gullah people are not well known throughout the United States. Only when these students moved to Conway, South Carolina did they first learn about the Gullah. Institutions such as Coastal Carolina's Department of History and the Joyner Institute for Gullah and African Diaspora Studies are likely some of the reasons that Gullah-Geechee culture is more widely promoted to individuals at the university. Only one of the thirty-nine students surveyed answered that they were completely comfortable with their knowledge on the history and culture of Gullah-Geechee. None of the thirty-nine students felt they completely understood the geographic extent, locations, and places associated with Gullah-Geechee people. One interesting point of note is that 30.8% of respondents placed their understanding of the geographic extent at a 4, while only 15.4% of respondents were a 4 when it came to understanding culture and history. The same percentage of respondents, 35.9% answered that

they were completely unaware of both the geographic extent and the cultural-historical context of Gullah.

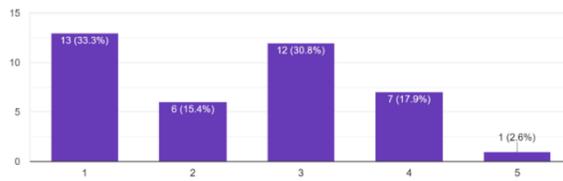
How well do you know the history and/or culture of Gullah-Geechee people?
39 responses



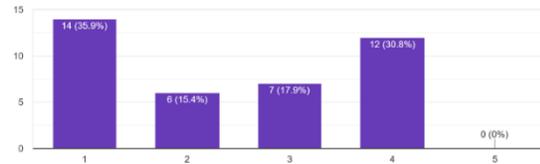
How well did you know Gullah/Geechee prior to coming to college?
39 responses



How well did you know Gullah/Geechee prior to this survey?
39 responses

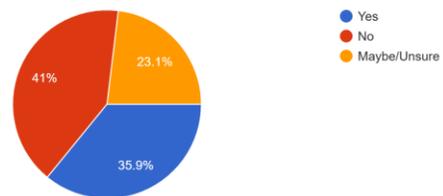


How well do you understand the geographic extent, locations and places associated with Gullah/Geechee culture.
39 responses



The final question asked of the respondents was, “Have you ever met someone who identified as Gullah/Geechee?” Unsurprisingly, the respondents from states in the Northeast, Midwest and West almost unanimously answered with either no or unsure. A large portion of students from the South, primarily from South Carolina, stated that they have met a person who identified as Gullah-Geechee. The lack of public knowledge of the Gullah-Geechee as a community in the South is likely one of the reasons that people in other regions of the United States believe they had never met a Gullah-Geechee person.

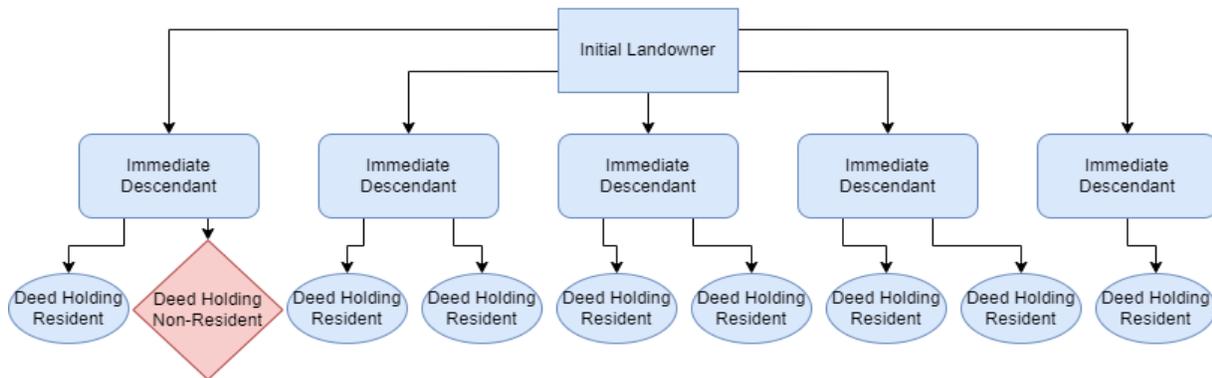
Have you ever met someone who has identified as Gullah/Geechee?
39 responses



Economic Issues Regarding the Transfer and Loss of Property

In the United States, heirs' property is defined as property that is inherited by multiple individuals as a 'tenancy in common'.⁵ Tenancy in common is when an estate or parcel of land is under equal ownership by multiple people who were either granted this land through written or unwritten inheritance⁶. Throughout generations, several descendants may share one deed, even if they no longer live there. Many deed holding residents have no personal connections to the land that the majority of their estranged family lives on, incentivizing them to take lucrative offers to sell. Ocean-front development companies have access to public land ownership records, and they use this information in order to acquire inhabited lands⁷. These developers force the Gullah residents out of their homes while also completely ignoring their cultural and personal significance of the lands they now own.

Heirs Property Land Title Flow Chart



⁵ Cassandra Johnson Gaither and Stanley J. Zarnoch, "Unearthing 'Dead Capital': Heirs' Property Prediction in Two U.S. Southern Counties," *Land Use Policy* 67 (2017): pp. 367-377, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2017.05.009>, 367.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sarah Hitchner, John Schelhas, and Cassandra Johnson Gaither, "'A Privilege and a Challenge': Valuation of Heirs' Property by African American Landowners and Implications for Forest Management in the Southeastern U.S.," *Small-Scale Forestry* 16, no. 3 (2017): pp. 395-417, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11842-017-9362-5>, 397.

The chart above depicts how, after several generations, a deed holding resident may be removed from their land. The deed holding non-resident highlighted by the red diamond may be someone who has not lived on the estate in question, and they may be someone who has become estranged or distanced from their family for whatever reason. Some communities of Gullah people have already been displaced from their lands of origin. Hilton Head Island in South Carolina is known as one of the most prominent examples of Gullah lands being redeveloped for the purpose of consumer tourism⁸. Several other locations that experienced this include James Island, SC, Mount Pleasant, SC, and St. Simmons Island, GA⁹.

Heirs property is something that, before this study, I did not believe impacted Georgetown County until I received a call to action from a non-profit environmentalists group called *Keep it Green in SC*, based out of Pawley's Island, SC. This organization found that one parcel of land on Pawleys Island, located near the intersection of Petigru & Martin Luther King, was acquired by developers through heirs' property¹⁰. Through an investigation done by *Keep it Green in SC*, they found that "This was 10 acres of Heirs' Property that had been owned by the Brown family since 1895¹¹." Little to no legislation exists at the local level that offers support or

⁸ Emory S. Campbell and Ayoka Campbell, *Gullah Cultural Legacies: A Synopsis of Gullah Traditions, Customary Beliefs, Artforms and Speech on Hilton Head Island and Vicinal Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia* (Hilton Head, SC: Gullah Heritage Consulting Services, 2008).

⁹ Maxine L. Bryant, "Land Ownership Challenge One Dock at a Time for Gullah Geechee Communities," *Savannah Morning News* (Savannah Morning News, October 13, 2021), <https://www.savannahnow.com/story/lifestyle/2021/10/13/gullah-geechee-communities-continue-face-loss-land-developers/8427024002/>.

¹⁰ Keep it Green in SC, "Protecting Our Community," *KeepitgreeninSC*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.keepitgreeninSC.com/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

protection against this sort of land acquisition. After acquiring an ownership interest, the developer brought a court action in 2012 to force the sale of the Brown family land at auction¹².

As ocean-front property continues to rise in value in the coming decades, both awareness and action are necessary in order to stop this from happening in Georgetown. Local and state ordinance regarding the transfer of heirs' property has been an issue that has impacted African American communities across the South for several generations. Not only has heirs' property helped facilitate the removal of Gullah people from their own lands, the rampant development taking place on these lands have also helped destabilize the local environment in several ways.

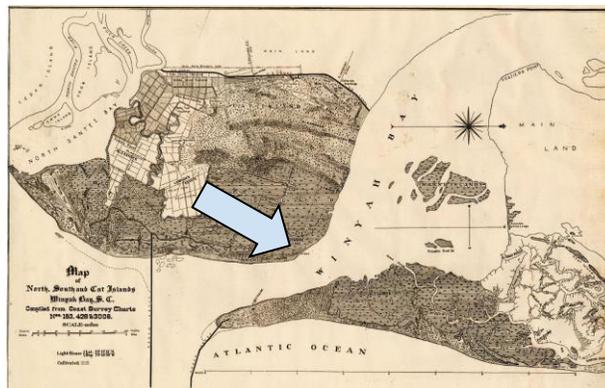
Environmental Issues and the Protection of Heritage Sites

Global climate change has begun to present several unique issues to sites that are historically Gullah in Georgetown County. When developers construct homes, rentals, and recreational attractions on the many waterways in the county, floodplains and marshes are often destroyed. According to an article by Dr. Masaru Morita in the *Journal of Flood Risk Management*, these natural resources are used to help mitigate flooding levels further down the river¹³. Georgetown County is host to five major rivers, four of which empty into the Winyah Bay. When hurricanes and large tropical storms hit the region, the amount of water that flows into the Winyah Bay increases. Due to a lack of resilience planning along these major rivers, erosion and flood damages have greater impacts on unprotected sites.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Masaru Morita, "Flood Risk Analysis for Determining Optimal Flood Protection Levels in Urban River Management," *Journal of Flood Risk Management* 1, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 142-149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-318x.2008.00016.x>, 143.

One specific Gullah heritage site that has recently been examined is known as the Fisherman's Village. Located on South Island, nearly 10 miles south of Georgetown, SC; This site has been at risk of losing all of its archaeological remains due to rapid acute erosion. To understand the rate at which this site has been losing its shoreline, I compared historic satellite imagery to the most recent geospatial data. Through this analysis, I can estimate how much longer the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Heritage Trust archaeologists have to work on the site before it is eroded away.



Rand McNally & Co Map of Winyah Bay, North, South and Cat Islands 1930

Prior to emancipation, South Island was host to at least seven different rice plantations that utilized slave labor. Following emancipation, newly freedmen established a fisherman's village on the eastern end of the Island. I estimate that this site was abandoned in either the late 1930's or early 1940's as former New York Yankee's owner Tom Yawkey purchased a majority of the Island to be used as his personal retreat¹⁴. Upon Tom Yawkey's death in 1972 The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) was given this land to be used as a wildlife and cultural heritage reserve¹⁵. In the last five years, the SCDNR Heritage Trust has sent an

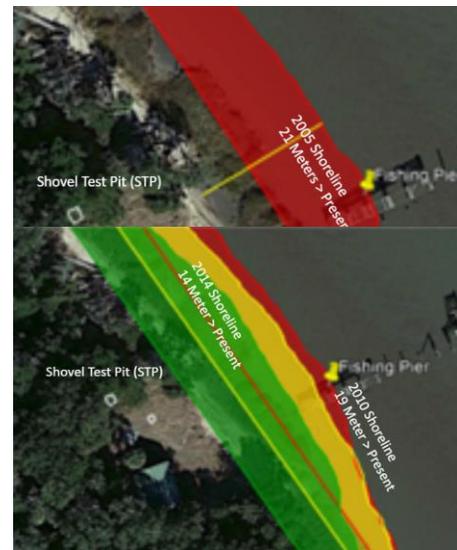
¹⁴ Yawkey Foundation, "Origin Story for Conservation & Wildlife," Yawkey Foundation, December 8, 2021, <https://yawkeyfoundation.org/giving/conservation-wildlife/origin-story/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

archaeologist to the site in order to excavate the land. The goal of this dig is to help us gain a better understanding of the daily lives of the Gullah people who lived on this land.

The shovel test pits (STP's) are indicated by the white rectangles on the left side of the figure. STP's indicate the places where Ground Penetrating Radar have detected artifacts or significant locations. The red outline depicts the shoreline present in April of 2005 at low tide. From April of 2005 to December of 2021, the shoreline has decreased by 21 meters. This means that in the past 15.5 Years, the shore has decreased at a rate of 1.35 meters per year. The average rate of erosion in Georgetown County is .61-.91 Meters per year according to the national survey of erosion risk study conducted by FEMA¹⁶ in 2000.

In the second figure, the yellow area represents the shoreline in 2010 and the green area represents the shoreline in 2014. From 2014 to 2021, we see the greatest rate of acute erosion at 2 meters per year. This increased rate of acute erosion can be attributed to the number of hurricanes that struck the region in this seven year span. According to the SCDNR Tom Yawkey staff, “Hurricane Irma in September of 2017 caused maximum inundation levels in



Georgetown County, from 1-2.2 meters and caused severe beach erosion¹⁷.” If erosion is to continue at this rate, the closest shovel test pit will be overtaken by water in less than seven years. The second shovel test pit will be overtaken by water in less than ten years at this rate.

¹⁶ Heinz, Center for Erosion Evaluation. “Evaluation of Erosion Hazards.” FEMA, April 2000. <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/erosion.pdf>.

¹⁷ From an unpublished Interview with Dr. Jodi Barnes, SCDNR Heritage Trust archaeologists with South Carolina Maritime Museum staff

The rapid acute erosion that has been destroying this heritage site is merely a symptom of several man-made and environmental changes that have gripped the region. Riverside housing developments along all four of the major rivers in the county have damaged wetlands and marshes that historically have made floods less severe. Non-sustainable shoreline conservation practices such as the construction of seawalls and jetties decrease the rate of inundation from flooding in some areas while increasing the rate of inundation in others¹⁸. All of these factors combined could mean that tropical storms and smaller hurricanes will critically impact unprotected heritage sites like the Gullah Fishing Village.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To properly address these issues in Gullah cultural conservation, you must utilize a holistic observation that considers the social, economic and environmental concerns all at once. The best immediate solution to all these issues would be to raise the awareness of Gullah culture and history. There is an immense lack of awareness of the Gullah-Geechee community both within South Carolina and in the United States. Increasing awareness through things like publications, museum exhibits and public education will help raise awareness. “Gullah (like culture) is a way of life; However, Gullah is a dying species – and that is the reason it is trending. Most of the universities in the South, almost every university, now is offering every program on Gullah Culture. Why? You cannot separate Gullah from our history in the United States than you can separate water from the Ocean- they just go together.” stated author Stephen Williams¹⁹. United Nations SDG Target 4.7 states that, for education to be sustainable it must include an

¹⁸ Masaru Morita, “Flood Risk Analysis for Determining Optimal Flood Protection Levels in Urban River Management,” *Journal of Flood Risk Management* 1, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 142-149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-318x.2008.00016.x>, 145.

¹⁹ From a life history interview conducted by South Carolina Maritime Museum Staff

“appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

Promoting awareness of Gullah people through the school system, and through public history would help us accomplish this target at the local level.

When there is recognition among individuals in the United States, there will be more awareness of heirs’ property. Citizens may be more likely to create petitions and push for legislation that protects the homes of Gullah people. Greater awareness may also lead to people with more of a desire to help protect heritage sites like the Fisherman's Village. Organizations such as the *Center for Heirs Property Preservation*, and *The Gullah-Geechee Chamber of Commerce*, are great signs that this awareness is increasing, and will likely continue to do so; Yet there is still much work to be done to sustain, conserve and protect Gullah culture.

Bibliography

- Bryant, Maxine L. "Land Ownership Challenge One Dock at a Time for Gullah Geechee Communities." *Savannah Morning News*. Savannah Morning News, October 13, 2021. <https://www.savannahnow.com/story/lifestyle/2021/10/13/gullah-geechee-communities-continue-face-loss-land-developers/8427024002/>.
- Campbell, Emory S. (Emory Shaw), and Ayoka. Campbell. 2008. *Gullah Cultural Legacies : a Synopsis of Gullah Traditions, Customary Beliefs, Artforms and Speech on Hilton Head Island and Vicinal Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia*. 3rd ed. Hilton Head, S.C: Gullah Heritage Consulting Services.
- Center for Erosion Evaluation, Heinz. "Evaluation of Erosion Hazards." FEMA, April 2000. <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/erosion.pdf>.
- Foundation, Yawkey. "Origin Story for Conservation & Wildlife." Yawkey Foundation, December 8, 2021. <https://yawkeyfoundation.org/giving/conservation-wildlife/origin-story/>.
- Fuller, Sharon Y. "Indigenous Ontologies: Gullah Geechee Traditions and Cultural Practices of Abundance." *Human Ecology* 49, no. 2 (2021): 121–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-021-00215-2>.
- Gaither, Jonathan, Cassandra, and Stanley J. Zarnoch. "Unearthing 'Dead Capital': Heirs' Property Prediction in Two U.S. Southern Counties." *Land Use Policy* 67 (2017): 367–77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2017.05.009>.
- Heinz, Center for Erosion Evaluation. "Evaluation of Erosion Hazards." FEMA, April 2000. <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/erosion.pdf>.
- Hitchner, Sarah, John Schelhas, and Cassandra Johnson Gaither. 2017. "'A Privilege and a Challenge': Valuation of Heirs' Property by African American Landowners and Implications for Forest Management in the Southeastern U.S." *Small-Scale Forestry* 16 (3): 395–417. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11842-017-9362-5>.
- Keep it Green in SC. "Protecting Our Community." KeepitgreeninSC. Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://www.keepitgreeninSC.com/>.
- Long, Richard A., *Low Country Gullah Culture, Special Resource Study : Environmental Impact Statement*. : D. 2005. United States: July 2005.
- Morita, Masaru. 2008. "Flood Risk Analysis for Determining Optimal Flood Protection Levels in Urban River Management." *Journal of Flood Risk Management* 1 (3): 142–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-318X.2008.00016.x>.
- NPS, *Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement*. Atlanta, GA: National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, 2005.