Underrepresentation of minorities in natural resource careers: Examining attitudes towards natural resource careers and perceptions of career barriers

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Content:
Racial and ethnic diversity in natural resource and environmental careers does not reflect the changing diversity of the United States. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of natural resource professions and to make recommendations to agencies interested in enhancing programs to increase minority recruitment into natural resource careers and to address barriers faced by these underrepresented groups. To explore this underrepresentation, we reviewed over 55 scholarly articles and conducted 38 structured and semi-structured interviews and 4 focus groups with undergraduate and graduate students. The results of the literature review showed that the lack of minorities in the natural resource field results from: (1) a lack of positive early exposure to nature and wildlife; (2) a lack of support through the education-to-career pipeline; (3) an inability of agencies to attract and retain minorities. We examined the influences of subculture and barrier theories, the significant life experience perspective, and social cognitive career theory, on students' perceptions of wildlife and nature, perceptions of natural resource professions and the role of barriers in pursuing and persisting in chosen career paths. Interviews of undergraduate students revealed that career satisfaction was the most important goal among those in conservation majors and the comparison group. Results also indicated that salary and independence were more important for the comparison group. Both groups perceived school difficulty and outsider perceptions as among their top 3 career barriers. However, conservation students had more pressure from their families to pursue traditional career paths. In addition, the comparison group had more negative attitudes about natural resource careers than conservation students. Focus groups are expected to reveal that minority students face barriers dealing with lack of resources, lack of exposure to the outdoors, and perceptions of discrimination or stereotypes.

Summary:
This presentation will be a summary of a literature review and the results of qualitative interviews dealing with the underpinnings of the underrepresentation of minorities in natural resource careers.