

ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE & PERCEPTIONS OF THE URBAN DC POPULATION

Some people, such as minorities and those from under-educated and lower income backgrounds, are typically excluded from conversations surrounding the degradation and improvement of ecosystem structure, function, and services.

Researchers at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) provided an opportunity for under-served populations to be heard on this issue while creating experiential learning opportunities for UDC students. They developed a survey instrument to gather public perceptions and knowledge on natural resources and climate change in 11 neighborhoods in Washington, DC. Data collection occurred over three fall semesters from 2016 through 2018 using undergraduate and some graduate students to collect data. The project assessed environmental knowledge and perceptions of 455 Washington DC residents. Results were used to inform content creation in academic courses in the urban sustainability and environmental science majors and in cooperative extension programs. Additionally, the results provide insights on collaborative efforts with diverse audiences to tackle environmental issues that affect quality of life. Survey results were recently published in a paper titled **“People with Different Educational Attainment in Washington, DC, USA have Differential Knowledge and Perceptions about Environmental Issues”** in the journal *Sustainability*.

The study is important for several reasons.

First, the participant group is in the capital city of the United States, and has not been surveyed previously. This group may strongly influence District and national policies and environmental initiatives. Secondly, some of the survey questions evaluated the knowledge of participants, but many questions assessed their perceptions. The authors believe perceptions of people are important for political reasons (who gets elected, what priorities get funded), educational reasons (what topics do environmental educators need to stress), and



practical reasons (how do you work across demographic groups to enact positive change). As has been previously seen, advanced education was generally linked with more environmental knowledge. However, the study also found that people with lower educational attainment still had environmental knowledge but prioritized local and immediate issues compared to global. This was an important result because people with lower education and income, and from certain racial and ethnic groups, have traditionally been marginalized and excluded from the environmental movement and making environmental decisions.

Understanding what people know and perceive is key to designing effective educational programs.

This understanding is also needed for engaging in collective conversations and building effective partnerships that find solutions for environmental problems that benefit the community. For example, stakeholders with advanced degrees may likely think and act more globally and show more of an interest in curtailing environmental problems that have a negative impact on their recreation, neighborhood aesthetics, and cultural/social practices. On the other hand, stakeholders with a high school education are likely to focus on local concerns and issues that have a more immediate impact on jobs and income. The authors aim to use these results to refine the survey instrument and investigate a broader audience with a focus on the African American/Black population. They believe the more inclusive we are in understanding the voices of under-represented minorities in urban areas, the better we can prepare climate resilient communities.

Research brief of: Richardson, M.L.; Milton, A.D.; **Harrison, E.**, (2020). People with Different Educational Attainment in Washington, DC, USA have Differential Knowledge and Perceptions about Environmental Issues. *Sustainability*, 12, 2063.

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