



Gullah/Geechee Agro-Culture (GGA) Research Project: Abstract

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Gullah/Geechee culture is characterized by self-determination and self-sufficiency; it is defiantly African and distinctively place-based. Created by the human will of people from multiple sections of the West Coast of Africa who were enslaved on plantations along the southeast coast, Gullah/Geechee represents the only group of African Americans who maintained a significant amount of Africanisms including foodways, land use practices, subsistence fishing, and the spoken Gullah language (Goodwine, 1998; Politzer, 1999). For centuries, Gullah/Geechee communities sustained a way of life predicated on the wealth of close-knit family compounds, and carefully nurtured the resources of the land and water (Dean, 2013). In recent decades, this way of life has been disrupted due to inequitable public policy. Beyond the negative impact on the immediate community, this disruption also has negative impacts on the larger farming ecosystem. Research shows that culture and agriculture ecosystems are inextricably linked – sustain culture, sustain agriculture (Dean, 2013).

The importance of Gullah/Geechee culture in the narrative of the American story is carefully outlined in a 435-page report by the National Park Service (NPS, 2005). The NPS report describes how 70% of African Americans in Beaufort County, SC owned farmland from 1870 until the 1960s. The report also details issues such as taxation and Heir's Property regulations resulted in massive land loss in the Gullah/Geechee community; as much as 20,000 acres were taken out of farming production within a five- year period. The Gullah/Geechee family farmers who remain on their land currently have limited capacity to operate their farms, and the transfer of wealth in knowledge and land to the next generation of Gullah/Geechee farmers is uncertain. This participatory action research project aims to engage farmers and fishers from the Gullah/Geechee culture in determining potentially workable strategies to address capacity issues and sustain family farming across generations. Research questions will be investigated using a systems approach that connects Gullah/Geechee farmers and fishers, community members and organizations, and public policy scientists into a collaborative agricultural systems research team. This team will collect and analyze data on the current state of Gullah/Geechee farming and fishing communities on St. Helena Island, identify and catalogue community-level strategies that can be used to transfer wealth to young Gullah/Geechee community members, and develop and deploy a framework that can be replicated in other Gullah/Geechee communities in the region.

This project is consistent with SARE's mission of advancing innovations that improve profitability, stewardship and the quality of life; and with SARE's vision of agriculture that is a force for a rewarding way of life for farmers whose operations sustain their communities. Moreover, this project is well-aligned with SARE's program objectives because it will strengthen and sustain Gullah/Geechee family farm systems for future generations, it will improve the quality of life for rural communities by enhancing local food systems and partnerships, it addresses the needs of limited-resource farming communities, and it promotes

traditional Gullah/Geechee practices valuing holistic approaches and strategies that support crop, livestock and enterprise diversification, and the well-being of wildlife and waterways.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this project is to strengthen Gullah/Geechee family farming and fishing systems and position future generations for long-term profitability and stability. In order to achieve this purpose, our systems research will work to meet the following objectives over a three-year period:

1. Conduct farm mapping and story documentation with the Gullah/Geechee communities on St. Helena Island that have existing family farming/fishing operations, identifying key quantitative and qualitative data related to people, produce, pests, policies and profits by the end of Year 1. This objective is relevant to the study purpose because a component of sustainability for the Gullah/Geechee agro-culture system is the transfer of generational knowledge and skills. By mapping and documenting the stories of existing family and fishing communities, our study will serve as a stop gap for Gullah/Geechee community members who have been disconnected from family compounds and the crucial generational knowledge transfer. Moreover, much of the data and findings from the mapping work will inform the process and strategies for Objectives 2-6.
2. Conduct a capacity analysis of local associations, cooperatives and markets (scope, participation, primary activities) on and around St. Helena Island by the end of Year 1. This objective is relevant to the study purpose because it will provide important and timely information about the availability of local support and technical assistance services for small family operations, as well as the level of resource mobilization for Gullah/Geechee farmers and fishers. Updated information on the status of farmers markets is especially important, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marketing activities and locations that have been traditionally used by Gullah/Geechee operations. This objective is directly related to the purpose of improving profitability and long term financial viability for socially disadvantaged farmers.
3. Conduct an equity analysis of local and state resources and policies related to farming and fishing operations by the end of Year 2. This objective is relevant to the study purpose for two reasons: (1) this work will help identify current policies, regulations and practices that may be having negative impacts on the economic viability for Gullah/Geechee farming operations, and (2), the work will also help identify potential policies that can better support these operations in the short and long-term. This objective is also directly related to the purpose of improving profitability and long term financial viability for socially disadvantaged farmers.
4. Develop and test a methodology to attract and educate young (under age 55) Gullah/Geechee farmers and fishers by the end of Year 2. This objective is relevant to the study purpose because it seeks to reengage some members who have already been disconnected from family farming, as well as to connect with other members of the community earlier in their career development process. If a methodology is successfully developed, it can be used to eventually close the gap in the generational knowledge transfer process, thereby improving the chances for long term sustainability of Gullah/Geechee farming and fishing operations on St. Helena Island.
5. Develop and disseminate Gullah/Geechee Agro-Culture framework to at least 7 other communities in the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor by October, Year 3. This objective is relevant to the study purpose it will present a research based and culturally relevant theoretical approach to help strengthen family farming and fishing systems, and position future generations for long-term profitability and stability in communities well

beyond the initial study area. This objective is also related to the purpose of improving the quality of life for families, consumers and communities.

6. Conduct an outcome evaluation of the Gullah/Geechee Agro-Culture research project and prepare a written report by the end of Year 3. This objective is relevant to the study purpose because to will help ensure the appropriate use of resources, provide comprehensive documentation of the process and research project outcomes, as well as identify recommendations for future research efforts related to agro-culture.