Making Tracks: Robert Gioielli

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In the "Making Tracks" series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

"We are also environmentalists"
By **Robert Gioielli**

One day in the spring of 2001 I received a call from Emory Campbell. At the time I was a reporter for the *Beaufort Gazette*, a daily newspaper in Beaufort, South Carolina, where I wrote about county government and the environment. Beaufort was a rapidly growing coastal community, with retirement homes, golf courses, and Home Depots sprouting up like weeds across the landscape. County government was the main forum where people hashed out conflicts over this growth, and the environment was often the issue they clashed over. This put me in contact with a wide variety of people from across the region, and I wrote stories about everything from shady land deals and sewer infrastructure to historic preservation, wildlife protection, and heated local council elections.

So a call from someone like Campbell was not unusual—it was just unexpected. At the time, he was long time director of Penn Center, a community outreach and education center on St. Helena Island, a coastal island about fifteen minutes outside of Beaufort proper. The South Carolina coast, or Lowcountry region as it is also known, had been dominated by large rice, indigo, and cotton plantations before the American Civil War. Its population at the time was about 90 percent African American, almost all of them slaves.

As someone who had been involved in community development, civil right issues, and local politics for decades, Campbell was extraordinarily well-respected. On the one or two occasions I had previously spoken to him, he was always polite and pleasant, but also guarded and reserved. He was also very hard to get a hold of, but this time he was calling me. He said he had noticed a number of stories recently about local environmental groups

and their opposition to various real estate development schemes. “We are also environmentalists,” he told me. We might not hire expensive lawyers and have fancy bumper stickers on our car, but we care about water quality because we fish in local streams and creeks, he said. We care about sprawl because it takes our land and family farms. We care about the environment because it is our home. It has been our home for generations past, Campbell told me, and we want it to be our home for generations to come.

I nodded along as Campbell talked, believing that I understood all of these issues. I had talked to other African Americans who were concerned about access to fishing grounds, water quality, and rapid development. I quoted them when they spoke at meetings and public hearings. I told Campbell I would like to sit down and talk with him about these issues some more. He said he would be happy to, but I never followed up.

A couple of years later, when I was deep into graduate school coursework and exploring environmental history, that conversation popped back into my head. Although I regretted never having the follow-up discussion, I was finally in a position to fully understand what Campbell had been trying to tell me. Lowcountry African Americans were not just environmentalists who simply cared about different issues, he was saying: they were environmentalists of a completely different type. I was learning that environmentalism was not monolithic, but a complex set of political ideals and attitudes that was dependent on a variety of social, historical and geographical factors. A person’s background and economic status, and where they lived and worked, shaped how they approached and understood the environment.

For African Americans in coastal South Carolina, this perspective came from decades of farming, hunting, and fishing in a specific island landscape. The great failure of the Reconstruction period after the American Civil War was the lack of land redistribution for the country’s recently freed slaves, but the Lowcountry had been one of the exceptions: on St. Helena and other coastal islands many African American families were able to purchase their own farms. By combining the crops from these modest homesteads with the sustenance from common fishing and hunting grounds, generations of Sea Islanders had been able to carve out a rough, but relatively independent, yeoman’s existence. During the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of African Americans had left coastal South Carolina for better educational and job opportunities in urban areas, especially in the North. In recent decades, many of them came back, either to retire or live permanently. Roads, telephones, and real estate development had forever changed

the isolated and close-knit rural world of their fathers and grandmothers. Nonetheless, they still understood the importance of environmental resources, not only for their cultural heritage, but also in ensuring economic security for future generations. Many still farmed or made their living as shrimpers, crabbers or fisherman. So when they spoke about clean water or access to fishing grounds, they were speaking from a specific environmental perspective.

When Emory Campbell called me that day to say "we are also environmentalists," he was trying to help me make the connection from that perspective to the politics of environmentalism. Why? Because those politics are powerful, but they are far too often exclusionary.

In Beaufort the local environmental activists were a small but dedicated group of lawyers, lobbyists, and volunteer private citizens. They were also white, well-educated, affluent, and well-respected; if they raised the alarm about pollution or the destruction of open space, most people would listen. Although the region was often bitterly divided over the proper balance between environmental regulation and the free market, most residents agreed that the area's unique coastal resources and landscape had to be protected. This meant that being able to claim the mantle of "environmentalist" and to frame concerns as "environmental" issues was powerful and useful. But like in much of the United States, this mantle was almost exclusively reserved for well-educated and affluent whites. They had the technical knowledge, socioeconomic status, and cultural markers that allowed a person to make environmental claims. What Campbell was doing was trying to get me to see beyond the language and trappings of contemporary American environmentalism and expand the definition to include the perspective of local African Americans. They had an intimate knowledge of the region and a tremendous stake in its preservation, but were not considered "environmentalists."

Expanding the definition of environmentalism to include a wide variety of perspectives and concerns has become one of my primary goals as an environmental historian, and is one of the key themes of the project I worked on as a fellow at the Rachel Carson Center, which will be published in May 2014 as a book entitled "Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago." Some have argued that it would be more appropriate to consider the localized concerns of minority groups in the United States, or of marginalized and disenfranchised populations across the globe, as environmental justice activism. But as important as this movement has been in focusing attention on environmental inequalities, I believe the term is too limiting. It

normalizes and naturalizes environmentalism, pushing any concerns about social or economic justice to the margins. Environmentalism becomes the “proper” politics, with environmental justice as its lesser and ghettoized little brother.

My journey towards realizing the importance of this goal began with Emory Campbell, but it ended in Munich. Through reading and talking with other RCC fellows about their work and the environmental politics of their home countries, I was forced to fully grapple with the variety of environmental perspectives across the globe, and incorporate this knowledge into my own work. Moreover, the regular interaction and exchange between scholars that the Carson Center encouraged and challenged me to refine my ideas and focus on their true importance and contribution. It was a life changing experience.