A COMPARISON OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE AMONG WATER STAKEHOLDERS IN NORTH FLORIDA

Natalie A. Cooper[1]*, Martha C. Monroe*[2]
[1]University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA
[2]School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

In North Florida, environmental organizations and farmers often disagree about the role of agriculture in Floridan aquifer water quality management. This dissonance intensifies in areas like the Santa Fe and Suwannee River watersheds where the aquifer is unconfined and more vulnerable pollution. Stakeholders may not only disagree about management decisions but also the nature of the problem and which facts are valid. Why? Environmental problems can escalate into conflicts because of differences in values and identities, or in other words, latent variables that aren't easily observed. Identities, or a person's sense(s) of self, develop over the long term, and researchers of environmental conflicts have revealed that identity is a frequent contributor to inter-group conflict. Understanding human-environment relationships – including the values, worldviews, and identities rooted in and intertwined with lived experiences and frequent outdoors exposure – of key stakeholders may provide insight into why perceptions related to water issues and management diverge and converge.

We explored human-environment relationships of rural producers and environmental professionals by examining individuals' connection to nature and development of environmental identity, or the extent to which individuals self-identify with the natural environment. How do conceptions of nature, sustainability, and stewardship; interactions with the outdoors; and ideologies around the environment compare? What do similarities and differences reveal about and/or contribute to communication barriers and conflict around water governance and management?

We conducted semi-structured interviews with farmers (n=10) and environmental professionals (n=11) in the North Florida region from May to August 2021. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and qualitative analysis involves thematic coding with a combination of deductive codes retrieved from the literature as well as inductive codes that emerge from interviews. Results will be shared at the conference. This research will enhance efforts to effectively communicate to and engage diverse stakeholder groups about water issues and solutions.

PRESENTER BIO: Natalie A. Cooper is a PhD candidate in Forest Resources and Conservation at the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences, University of Florida. Her research combines conservation psychology, communication, and sustainable rural livelihoods to understand perspectives in natural resource management, especially among resource users.