

REGULATION, CONSERVATION AND COLLABORATION:
ECOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

(Order No.)

ELEANOR E. SHOREMAN

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2009

Major Professor: Robert P. Weller, Professor of Anthropology

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the increasing conservation efforts of commodity farmers in the Mississippi Delta, which have succeeded despite this community long having been grouped with other conservative groups in the United States as “anti-environmentalist.” These farmers are predominantly white, ultra-conservative Republicans with controversial views on race, women, and the proper treatment of the environment. The region is also known for its historical antipathy for federal regulatory agencies. Yet Delta farmers have recently begun to invest in conservation practices and espouse a new view on environmental protection. The organizations that have encouraged Delta farmers to participate in conservation are not federally funded programs or liberally guided environmental groups. They are instead private, locally established organizations dedicated to preserving agricultural autonomy and economic prosperity. My research indicates that this partnership of local conservation groups and farmers is not a “green” union, but rather an effort to assure a sustainable and profitable agricultural economic base that is being motivated by the Delta’s cultural dedication to early action in order to prevent any external regulation of internal affairs.

The data for this research were collected from approximately 200 formal and an even greater number of informal ethnographic interviews conducted in the central Delta during 2006

and 2007. Interviewees mainly consisted of male farmers between the age of 35 and 65, as well as individuals from the greater agricultural, environmental, and residential communities.

This material contrasts with recent findings on the creation of environmental subjects. One line of current research speaks of environmentalism as creating spaces of popular resistance to power structures. A second, growing out of the work of Foucault, argues instead that support for environmental protection ultimately rests on state intervention and top-down conservation methods. Research on the Mississippi Delta charts a middle ground between these two views, which recognizes how local environmentalisms may chart more complex relationships with dominant discourses of the state or NGOs. The findings here raise new questions about connections between local initiatives and centralized state environmental management and point to the importance of social history - often outside the realm of environmental issues - in explaining this intersection.