

# **American Beach: A Case Study of Segregation in Leisure**

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## **Introduction**

Many of today's students are unaware of the system-imposed segregation that used to exist in leisure settings and it is often difficult for students to see how explicit, implicit, and self-imposed segregation marks leisure settings today. Beaches, pools, recreation centers, and even the national parks often serve homogeneous populations with little true integration. In addition, people who are gay, homeless, or who don't speak English are often overlooked and underserved by public recreation providers, left to create their own leisure alternatives in self-segregated settings like African Americans did during the era of Jim Crow. And since today's integration is not yet matched with the elimination of stigma and prejudice, self-segregation may still offer a measure of safety and affirmation that can be difficult to find in integrated settings. This class activity helps students better understand the nature of segregated recreation.

## ***Lesson Outcomes***

For this lesson, students read Marsha Phelts (1997) *An American Beach for African Americans*. They then create a project relating to the history of American Beach or a local segregated leisure venue. At the end of this lesson students should be able to:

- Discuss segregation as it pertained to leisure for African Americans during Jim Crow
- Discuss ways that explicit and implicit segregation exist in contemporary leisure settings
- Distinguish between system-imposed and self-imposed segregation in leisure settings
- Identify the negative and positive consequences of segregation as it occurs in leisure
- Develop strategies that honor and preserve the leisure traditions of diverse groups

### *The Phenomenon of American Beach*

Before the 1960s, strict codes of system-imposed segregation prevented African Americans from attending many public leisure sites including public beaches. This reflected a racist belief that African Americans should not encroach upon the spaces and places that “white folks” used. If communities with ocean beach access allowed African Americans to use their beaches at all, it was on a limited basis with the clear understanding that these visits were granted through the generosity of white citizens. In the 1930s, when beach resorts were becoming popular, some African Americans purchased property on Amelia Island, Florida, to develop a beachfront community exclusively for African Americans. Called American Beach, this resort consisted of privately owned beach houses, a hotel, and several restaurants. Initially serving African Americans from Tallahassee, American Beach gained national prominence as one of the few ocean resorts for African Americans and attracted visitors from throughout the U.S.

The civil rights laws of the 1960s created massive changes for African Americans by desegregating public areas and facilities. This opened up public beaches for use by African Americans, though prevailing strife and prejudice prevented many blacks from using those facilities. Today, a large portion of our society has no memory of or experience with system-imposed segregation. However, desegregation has brought some surprising negative consequences to the African American community, moving them out of private communities that had offered affirmation, rejuvenation, and cultural celebration, and placing them instead into leisure sites under white control and surveillance. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, this represented both a gain and a loss for the African American community.

Today a greater danger has arisen at American Beach, stemming from tourism developers who are building huge resorts and expansive golf courses up and down the Atlantic coast. Elite resorts and condos that parallel the segregationist white communities of the past now surround American Beach. Gated entrances keep out everyone but paying or invited guests, thus preventing “undesirables” from encroaching upon the gardens, beaches, and recreation facilities that now subsume this island. Though the resorts do not discriminate on the basis of race or ethnicity, their guests are primarily white and relatively wealthy. This visible class distinction mirrors in many ways the segregation of the past.

### *Preparation for the Lesson*

Before students read the book, ask them to reflect on their own trips to the beach (or other family vacations). Have each student share a childhood beach or vacation experience. If the class is large, divide students into small groups for discussion. The following questions will help stimulate students’ memories:

- Briefly tell the story of the trip—how you traveled, where you stayed, what you did, etc.

- Do you have memories of other people who were at this beach/vacation destination at the same time you were there? Who were these other people?
- What is your most memorable experience from this trip? What sensory words would you use to describe that experience?

Be sensitive to the probability that some students did not take family trips or do not have good memories of family vacations, and allow them to speak about any special location they associate with childhood recreation. Encourage students to keep these memories in mind as they read Marsha Phelts' book.

Resume this lesson one week after that discussion, allowing time for students to read *An American Beach for African Americans*. In this very readable book, Marsha Phelts recounts her childhood memories of summer vacations at American Beach, describing the people, places, and events that characterized this lively community. She also speaks of the changes that have occurred over time. A more detailed portrayal of the history of this community can be found in Russ Rymer's (1998) *American Beach: A Saga of Race, Wealth, and Memory*.

### *Classroom Discussion*

To facilitate discussion, use pictures from the book and the Internet to visually portray American Beach. These scenes are typical of many beach vacations and could easily be pictures of any resort of that era, except for the fact that all people are African American. Use this to help dispel stereotypes and highlight similarities between American Beach and the resorts or vacations that the students described from their own experiences. Then move the discussion toward the on-going struggle that confronts American Beach in the face of commercial development. The following are some effective discussion questions:

- Were you aware that there had been African American beaches? Does it surprise you? (This should lead into a discussion of the various forms of segregation.)
- How would you feel if you went to an all-black beach? (If possible, ask this question separately to an African American student and non-African American student.)
- Why do you think this community has been in decline since the 1960s? What has been lost as a result? (This leads into a discussion of some of the inadvertent consequences of civil rights, desegregation, and commercial development.)
- Do you think segregated beaches still exist today? (This leads into a discussion of implicit and self-imposed segregation in contemporary recreation facilities; have students identify segregated recreation based on characteristics other than race.)

- Can segregation ever be good? (This leads into a discussion of psychological “safety” characterized by the absence of stigma or perceived judgment.)

### *Student Assignments*

A variety of assessment strategies are possible with this lesson, however the following two assignments have been successful:

American Beach Travel Guide: Based on the book by Marsha Phelts and additional research online, develop an effective travel guide, preservation project, or other activity that addresses the American Beach community. Your product should reflect the historical and/or cultural significance of this community, detail how the project should be used, and have important utility. You are limited only by your own creativity. (Previous course products have included cookbooks, web-campaigns, travel brochures/packages, board games, museum quality videos, self-guided tour books, historical scrapbooks, etc.)

Segregated Leisure Observation: Visit a popular public leisure/recreation location and evaluate that setting in terms of segregation (you may select any type of segregation discussed in class). Who was at the setting during your observations? Did the activities and patterns of interaction indicate an integrated environment or did people of different groups keep primarily to themselves? After you have made your observations, research the history of segregation in that community. Speak with the park district or associated agencies to see if they have any historical information, and speak with residents to hear of their experiences with system-imposed or self-imposed segregation in leisure. Make extra copies of your written report and give a copy to the local park district and/or the community members you interviewed.

### **References**

Phelts Marsha D. (1997). *An American Beach for African Americans*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

Rymer, Russ. (1998). *American Beach: A Saga of Race, Wealth, and Memory*. NY: HarperCollins.