



## **Dorceta E. Taylor (1957-Present)**

Professor;  
James E. Crowfoot Collegiate Chair;  
Director of Diversity, Equity, and  
Inclusion

**University of Michigan  
School of Natural Resources and  
Environment (SNRE)  
Program in the Environment (PITE)  
Ann Arbor, Michigan**

### **Selected Awards**

- Charles Horton Cooley Award for distinguished scholarship. Michigan Sociological Assoc. 2015
- Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Outstanding Alumnus Award. 2015
- Fred Buttel Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Environmental Sociology. The Environment and Technology Section of the American Sociological Association. 2015.

### **Program Director for:**

- **Vision for a Sustainable Environmental Future (VSEF)**
- **The Food Access in Michigan (FAIM) Project**
- **The Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program (DDCSP)**
- **The Environmental Fellows Program (EFP)**

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*“Mentoring is only as good as the protégé’s ability to recognize good advice and act on it.” Dorceta E. Taylor, 2005.*

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## Overview

My research interests include urban agriculture, food access, and food insecurity; institutional diversity; analysis of the composition of the environmental workforce; social movement analysis; environmental justice; leisure and natural resource use; poverty; and race, gender, and ethnic relations. I have published several books and articles and issued influential reports on environmental justice, conservation history, diversity, and food insecurity.

I currently direct several programs including SNRE's diversity equity and inclusion program. I developed and direct two pipeline programs – the [Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program](#) at the University of Michigan and the [Environmental Fellows Program](#). I am also directing a multi-institutional project that is studying food access issues in the state of Michigan. A program I founded and formerly directed, the Multicultural Environmental Leadership Development Initiative, has morphed into Vision for a Sustainable Environmental Future; I currently direct VSEF.

## Early Life and Education

I became interested in the environment when I was a young girl growing up in rural Jamaica. One of my tasks was to tend the family rose garden and I became fascinated by the flowers and butterflies as well as the countless fruit trees in the yard. I loved going to the garden in the early morning because I could gaze at the nearby waterfall – I particularly liked it when it was obscured by the mist that sometimes blanketed the hillsides. When I was eight, my grammar school teacher opened a magical world to me. One afternoon the teacher led our class through the fields and to the banks of the river on which our small school perched. She handed each of us a new notebook; and as she carefully spelled out the words, "Environmental Studies," each child copied the letters precisely, being careful not to make a mistake. It was 1965. Our teacher told us that this was a new subject that that we would be studying. I was mesmerized!

The second awakening came four years later in 1969 during my first year in high school. I was then a twelve-year-old girl sitting in the front row of a crowded, sparsely-furnished classroom in Kingston waiting anxiously to see how long the substitute teacher would last before he or she would retreat to the staff room in despair. Being the honors students of the first-year high school class, my classmates had already mastered the art of being disruptive without breaking school rules or being punished too severely. Our collective rule-bending was always well organized and choreographed. Our favorite tactic was to begin a world knowledge contest before the teacher arrived in the room. Once begun, it was nigh impossible for a neophyte teacher to turn our attention to other subjects. Boys sat on one side of the room and girls on the other. We lobbed questions regarding obscure facts at each other. A scorekeeper kept order and recorded the score on the chalkboard. The object of the game was to settle a question that had plagued us all year, were boys smarter than girls? As talk of "women's liberation" filtered into our consciousness, the game got more intense. We spent hours in the library after school each day, trying to unearth facts that we would use to stymie the opposition.

On this particular day, we were so caught up in the competition that we failed to notice a tall, elegant black man standing at the door. "What is the intraventricular septum?" he asked. There was stunned silence. It took three or four attempts to get some rough approximation of the answer. Sensing a challenge, the focus of the game shifted; it was now the class against the teacher. He fired questions at

us and we fired questions at him for an hour. We couldn't stump him. Up to that point in my life, I had never met anyone who was so smart and who had such presence. Most of our teachers wanted no part of the game; they squelched it as soon as they walked in the room. We were intrigued. We stayed through the entire lunch hour to listen to him. He told us he was a professor, and "a learned man." That evening I went home and wrote a note to myself in the only private place in the house. I pulled my bed away from the wall and added one more goal to my list. On the wall I wrote, "Get a Ph.D.; become a professor and a learned woman." "The professor" as our American visitor became known, was in our school for a few more days and then simply vanished. None of us really knew his real name or could figure out why he had visited our school. For me, he stayed long enough to demonstrate that learning was an enjoyable life-long undertaking, and that a career involving the pursuit of knowledge was possible.

At the time I decided to become a professor, the career opportunities for and the aspirations of girls were limited. Despite the fact that I had no idea how I was going to attain my goal, I began pursuing it with intense determination from that age on. I knew that if I studied hard and got good grades, then the likelihood that the rest would fall in place was greatly enhanced.

In the meantime, my fascination with the environment continued – it only grew stronger after I was introduced to biology in high school. I specialized in zoology and botany passing both the University of Cambridge ordinary and advanced levels exams. I also entered a teacher-training college and studied to become a teacher at the same time I pursued my Cambridge advanced level studies. I became a certified high school science teacher in 1977. While teaching, I shared my enthusiasm for the environment with my students. Just before I left Jamaica in 1978, my second-year science class in the girls boarding school in which I taught, I won the National Junior Science Exhibition award for the project I did with them studying light and shade tolerance of pinto bean plants. That same year, one of the students I trained also became the regional Spelling Bee champion.

I completed my undergraduate education in the United States, specializing in biology and environmental studies. At times, I worked full time and took a full-time course load. I graduated from Northeastern Illinois University with high honors in 1983. However, for graduate school I wanted to work more on the relationship between people and the environment. I was always concerned with poverty and social inequality (especially as it affected people in developing countries), and wanted to incorporate it more fully into my academic pursuits. At the time, I found the discipline of biology did not pay much attention to social issues so I decided to focus less on biology and more on environmental studies and sociology as a means of cultivating my interests.

When I was admitted to the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in 1983, I was the second black woman admitted to the master's program in the history of the school. I completed a Master of Forest Science degree in 1985 and was admitted into the doctoral program that same year. From 1985-1991, I completed a Master of Arts and a Master of Philosophy degree as well as dual doctorates. I developed an individualized program of study in which I pursued one doctorate in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and another in the Department of Sociology concurrently. I am the first black woman to get a doctorate from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. (Founded in 1901, the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies is the oldest school of its kind in the country.)

In choosing which graduate school to attend, I faced a dilemma – go to one of the schools that offered full fellowships or take out a large student loan to go to school where I felt I would get the best education. I chose the latter – and if faced with the same choice again today, would make the same decision. After completing my first master's degree, I got several national and university-wide fellowships to pursue

doctoral and post-doctoral studies. While a doctoral student, I was the recipient of a Patricia Roberts Harris Fellowship, Yale Dissertation Fellowship, Bouchet Dissertation Fellowship, and a National Research Council Ford Dissertation Fellowship. I also received two Mellon fellowships to conduct dissertation field research in the Virgin Islands and to study organization theory.

## Career

In 1991 I received a National Science Foundation post-doctoral fellowship to conduct research in England. I also lived in Canada for a year. In 1992, I applied for post-doctoral and faculty positions at the same time. I received a Rockefeller-Ford post-doctoral fellowship in Michigan's Poverty and the Underclass program. I was also offered a tenure-track position with a joint appointment in the School of Natural Resources and Environment (SNRE) and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies (now the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies). I accepted both positions at Michigan: I spent the first year as a post-doctoral fellow and assumed full-time faculty responsibilities in 1993.

I am currently a Professor of Environmental Sociology at the University of Michigan where I once served as the Environmental Justice Field of Studies Coordinator in SNRE. I have taught courses in environmental history, environmental politics, environmental justice, environment and development, gender and environment, tourism and sustainable development, sociological theory, and food insecurity. My research focuses on history of mainstream and environmental justice ideology and activism, social movements and framing, and diversity in the environmental field.

My current research includes an assessment of food access in Michigan and other parts of the country. A 2015 article on food justice in Detroit entitled, "[Food Availability and the Food Desert Frame in Detroit: An Overview of the City's Food Systems](#)" (Environmental Practice), exemplify this work.

Other recent research activities include the 2014 national report analyzing racial and gender diversity in the environmental field -- see [The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations, and Government Agencies](#). A regional diversity report -- also published in 2014 -- is entitled, [Environmental Organizations in the Great Lakes Region: An Assessment of Institutional Diversity](#).

My 2009 book, [The Environment and the People in American Cities](#) (Duke University Press), is an award-winning urban environmental history book. I published an edited volume in 2010 entitled, [Environment and Social Justice: An International Perspective](#) (Emerald Press). I also published [Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility](#) (NYU Press) in 2014. My newest book, [Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection: Social Inequality and the Rise of the American Conservation Movement](#) was published by Duke University Press in 2016.

As SNRE's Director of [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion \(DEI\)](#), I spearheaded the school's DEI strategic planning process, helped to produce a diversity report ([Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Five-Year Strategic Plan for SNRE](#)) and is currently overseeing the implementation of diversity initiatives. I direct other programs and projects. These include the Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program at the University of Michigan. The program, which is in its second year, brings 40 diverse undergraduates from across the country to the University of Michigan for two eight-week summer opportunities. In the first year students participate in research projects directed by professors and research scientists. In the second year students are placed in environmental nonprofits or government environmental agencies for internships. I am also the director of the Environmental Fellows Program. This initiative grows out of a collaboration with the

Environmental Grantmakers Association and the C. S. Mott Foundation. It is a 13-week internship program that places diverse graduate students from all over the country in work opportunities in environmental grantmaking foundations, environmental nonprofits, or government environmental agencies. This program, also in its second year, will have 22 interns in 2017.

## Highlights

I have received several awards. These include:

- 2016** University of Michigan award for Leadership on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Planning Process.
- 2015** James E. Crowfoot Collegiate Chair. University of Michigan.
- 2015** Charles Horton Cooley Award for distinguished scholarship. Michigan Sociological Association.
- 2015** Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Outstanding Alumnus Award.
- 2015** Fred Buttel Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Environmental Sociology Award. The Environment and Technology Section of the American Sociological Association.
- 2014** Carol Hollenshead Award for Excellence in Promoting Equity and Social Change. The Center for the Education of Women. University of Michigan.
- 2014** SF Environment. Celebrating Black Environmentalists During Black History Month. Recognition as one of 29 top Black environmentalists named to the list.

In addition, I review proposals for the National Science Foundation and National Research Council. I also review journal articles for a number of leading journals. I recently served on the selection committee for the Morris K. Udall Foundation fellowship program. Because of the nature of my work and the interest in environmental justice, I get numerous requests for speaking engagements.

As a mother of twins, I try to balance life and career by limiting the number of speaking engagements I commit to in a given year. My professional life is an important part of my identity, but family is also very important. It is important to my husband and I take the time to raise our girls so that they become strong women who can make intelligent choices and balance the various aspects of their lives when they get older.

## Challenges

Nothing in life is easy, and embarking on an environmental career is by no means a walk in the park. In many ways, the easy option for me would have been to continue on the pre-med path and become a doctor or a biomedical researcher. Subjects like biology, botany, zoology came effortlessly to me, but I would have been extremely unhappy with those choices. I took the road less traveled by switching from a purely natural science degree to a blend of social and natural science. This was risky – especially since the switch did not occur until I was in graduate school, and at the time I made the switch, I had little social science background. However, once I decided on the career I wanted and finally figured out all the steps I needed to take to attain it, I was willing to go against conventional wisdom, be ostracized by my peers, take the risk of being the "only one" or the "first one" to achieve my objectives. At first I just "toughed it out," but later I began to realize that many great leaders or thinkers were very unconventional. Simply

following the crowd often leaves little for innovation. Over time, I began to view my unconventional path and choices as preparation for something unusual – I don't know yet what that might be.

I absolutely enjoy being a professor and would do nothing else despite the fact that I could earn a lot more money in other jobs. However, money has never driven my career choices – freedom to control my time, thought processes, and area of research, as well as the chance to work with young people have always been far more important to me than money. Furthermore, I cannot imagine myself working in any other field. I discovered early on that I hated the 9-5 routine, being stuck in an office, and having someone watch over me all the time. I work best when I control my time and creativity. Academia is the ultimate place in allowing for that. I work long hours every day of the week. If I were expected to put in that amount of time in an office, I would be much less inclined to do so.

## **Mentoring Others**

I like meeting and working with students, teaching them and watching the "light bulb turn on" in their heads. I mentor many students at the University of Michigan and elsewhere. I like the growth and progress one sees in students as they mature and develop their own careers. This is the most exciting part of my career.

There are ebbs and flows to everyone's career. The periods of normalcy are sometimes interrupted by intense high and lows. One such low point occurred in 1987. I was then a second-year doctoral student attending a professional conference in Washington, D.C. on a hot, humid day in August. Somewhat apprehensively, I walked into a social gathering of people in my field. I met a few professors and students from other universities and was just starting to feel comfortable when an older gentleman walked over to me – I was the only minority person in the room – and said in a loud voice, "What are you doing here? Deliveries are in the rear!" Nothing prepares one for moments like this and all the things you tell yourself you should have said or should have done completely escape you (they usually come back after the moment has passed). The room went silent. All fifty or so people in the room stared at me. I looked at the man and said, "The same thing everybody else is doing here." I don't quite remember what else I said. I knew I took a sip of my wine and turned back to the person I was conversing with before being interrupted. For the next little while, two competing thoughts raced through my mind – leave the room and conference immediately or stay. Instinct took over, I stayed. It also occurred to me that no one said anything; after an awkward pause lasting a few seconds, everyone went back to their wine, cheese and conversation.

I later learned that the man who confronted me was a "big name" professor in the discipline. Indeed he is quite renowned in the field and has a reputation as a liberal thinker. About an hour after initially confronting me, the man approached me again and quietly said, "I am sorry I said that to you. You were wearing white and I thought you were the server. I just came out of a long meeting, I am tired and I just snapped." No one else in the gathering ever said anything about the event till last year. The young man I was talking to when the incident occurred sent me an email out of the blue raising the issue again. As it turned out, he was a first-year doctoral student studying under the professor and felt powerless to intervene.

In the few seconds I pondered staying or leaving the room, I didn't think of the larger ramifications of the decision. Leaving the room would have meant leaving the discipline (and if I was going to do that I wanted to do it on my own terms). As it turns out, to this day, just about every article or book submitted for

publication, research grant submitted for funding, even my review for tenure go through some of the people who were in that room. Though I did not know it at the time, a decision to stay in the room really meant I had to figure out how to have some kind of long-term professional relationship with the people in that room.

I haven't allowed events like this to cloud my view of field or the people in it. Over the years, I have met and worked with many people who have been incredibly gracious and generous with their time. My advisors at Yale, William Burch, Paul DiMaggio, Wendell Bell and Kai Erikson helped me how to think more analytically at the same time they pushed me to produce work of very high standards. They were willing to give advice when I sought it.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Throughout my profession, I have always sought advice from people who are more senior and who understand how systems, institutions and networks function. I maintain contact with people who understand the unwritten and informal rules of the game since these are often crucial to one's career. At the University of Michigan senior colleagues helped me to understand the intricate ways in which academic departments functioned. On a larger scale, I have maintained contact with a large number of people who I can always count on to give me a perspective that comes from outside the institution in which I work. Mentoring is only as good as the protégé's ability to recognize good advice and act on it.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

To young people considering a career in the environmental field, if you don't have a mentor, get one! Once you do have a mentor, be aware that the protégé plays an active role in the mentoring process. That is, the protégé sets goals, seeks out good mentors, solicits advice, acts on the advice given, and makes the adjustments necessary to mature, meet their goals and flourish.

## **For More Information**

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