



WATER MARKS

www.lacoast.gov

Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration News

September 2019 Number 60



Preserving history, culture
and identity while losing place

Geographic Change Reshapes the Bayou Way of Life

September 2019 Number 60

WaterMarks is published two times a year by the Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force to communicate news and issues of interest related to the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act of 1990.

This legislation funds wetlands restoration and enhancement projects nationwide, designating nearly \$80 million annually for work in Louisiana. The state contributes 15 percent of total project costs.

WaterMarks Editor

Amy Robertson

3737 Government Street
Alexandria, LA 71302
318-473-7762

Changing address? Please don't forget to let us know.

If you receive the print version of *WaterMarks* and would prefer to receive the digital version, please email lacoast@nwrccom.cr.usgs.gov

ABOUT THIS ISSUE'S COVER . . .

From the earliest native inhabitants of the area to the most recent international immigrants, people of diverse customs and folkways have made south Louisiana their home. Noted for its food, music, festivals, and ties to family and to place, the region's distinctive culture blends many different perspectives and practices.

Credit: Copyright Diane Huhn

2 September 2019 Number 60

WATERMARKS

Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration News

September 2019 Number 60

CONTENTS

- 3 Joie de Vivre! Song, Dance, Stories and Parades in Coastal Louisiana
- 9 Leaving the Bayou, Looking for Home
- 15 WaterMarks Interview with Jonathan Foret



Copyright Diane Huhn

For more information about Louisiana's coastal wetlands and the efforts planned and under way to ensure their survival, check out these sites on the World Wide Web:

www.lacoast.gov
www.coastal.la.gov
www.btnep.org
www.crcl.org

twitter.com/CWPPRA
Instagram: [@cwppra_outreach](https://www.instagram.com/cwppra_outreach)
cwppra blog at
cwppra.wordpress.com (USGS)



Like CWPPRA on Facebook at facebook.com/CWPPRA

Subscribe

To receive *WaterMarks*, e-mail lacoast@nwrccom.cr.usgs.gov

Moving? The post office will not forward *WaterMarks*. To continue delivery, send your change of address to lacoast@nwrccom.cr.usgs.gov

For current meetings, events, and other news concerning Louisiana's coastal wetlands, subscribe to the CWPPRA Newsflash, our e-mail newsletter, at <https://www.lacoast.gov/new/News/Newsflash.aspx> (USGS)



GROWN UP ON THE BAYOU

Joie de Vivre! Song, Dance, Stories and Parades in Coastal Louisiana

“**L**ike gumbo and red beans and rice, our music identifies us,” says Quenton Fontenot, a musician and professor of biology at Nicholls State University. “It is a message about who we are and what we do.”

Since the mid-sixteenth century, when European adventurers began to explore the southern lands of the Mississippi River, people from diverse cultures have immigrated to the region. Each group of settlers brought with it the language, customs, tastes and

beliefs of their homeland. Sometimes the relative isolation of coastal communities encouraged members to keep to their old ways; at other times contact among different peoples resulted in a new Louisiana character, expressed through a mingling of customs, or a merging of food preferences and cooking methods, or a synthesis of musical styles.

“Distinctive because of its lyrics and instrumentation, the sound of bayou music derives from incorporating the instruments of Louisiana’s numerous immigrant

groups,” says Fontenot. Various combinations of the European violin, African banjos and drums, the German accordion, brass band instruments, and pianos and guitars fused to create jazz, Cajun dancehall music, Creole, zydeco and swamp pop, while contributing to the broader categories of gospel, country music and delta

The fiddle and the accordion, both instruments of European origin, give much of coastal Louisiana’s music its distinctive sound. Largely isolated in wetland communities, musicians developed modes of expression that, while rooted in ancestral traditions, blended influences from the myriad musical heritages of the region’s diverse performers.

blues. Each genre can trace its roots back to old musical traditions while featuring the fruits of cross-pollination. Many times those roots lead back to the rhythms, instrumentation and call-and-response vocalizations that Louisianans of African descent contributed to the region's music.

The folklorist Nicholas Spitzer suggests that jazz, born and bred in Louisiana, represents the spirit of improvisation and creative adaptation that enables immigrants to adjust to a new home and thrive in a different culture. The music drew together performers of different ethnicities that otherwise seldom mingled, among them African Americans, Creoles, Canary Islanders, Italians, Germans and Irish.

With roots in old French ballads of the Acadians, the genre of Cajun music emerged in the late 19th century. A popular dancehall music, its original instruments were only an accordi-

on, fiddle and triangle; later bands would add guitars and drums. "With its distinctive, limited scale of the 10-button accordion, Cajun music is part of the coast, part of the habitat," says Fontenot. "It's the soundscape for crab boils and fish fries, for paddling in the marsh or watching birds, for looking at pictures of our ancestors."

To revive the performance of Cajun music in rural areas where live music has declined with the widespread availability of recorded music, Fontenot and three friends founded the Cajun Music Preservation Society. "We're passing on the tradition of people learning to play Cajun music by jamming with other musicians," says Fontenot. "Everyone can join in. Even four- and five-year-olds sit in the circle playing the triangle or washboard. Older couples kick up their heels to hear bands play in their home town again. People hear music, it brings back memories."

The tunes are cheerful but the lyrics, sung in Cajun French and telling stories of love, loss, work and the rigors of daily life, are often sad. So too were the songs of the musicians' ancestors, the Acadians. Full of sadness and longing, the lyrics suggest nostalgia for home and speak of the hardships of emigration.

Music from the old country keeps alive language as well as memories; Spanish-speaking Canary Islanders, the Isleños, brought the tradition of décimas, songs of ten lines celebrating daily life and work or recalling Isleño history and folk heroes. Louisianans descended from the Islanders continue this musical tradition, although their community – like so many in Louisiana – has

Song and dance have long been traditions in southern Louisiana.

Left: Zydeco musicians with their instruments, photographed in the 1930s.

Right: An engraving from a book about travels in the American South pictures a Louisiana dance hall in the 1870s.



Library of Congress



J. Wells Champney



Wikimedia Commons



Wikimedia

dwindled and dispersed in recent years.

In my grandfather's tongue

Language remains a link between present-day Cajuns and their Acadian ancestors. "Louisiana regional French, popularly called Cajun French, derived from the French-Canadian immigrants who settled in the region in the 18th century," says Robin White, professor of English and French at Nicholls State University. "The world over, language is preserved in isolated communities. In Louisiana's bayous, where roads were few and access difficult, French remained the common language for centuries, although with little consistent contact with the outside world, each community developed a somewhat different accent and a slightly different way of using words."

Even today there are pockets of elderly residents who

speak only French, and stories of grandparents who understood no English are not uncommon. "Men remained solely French-speaking longer than women," says White. "Men spoke French amongst themselves as they worked or hunted or fished together, and men were permitted the cultural space of music, in which French lyrics became a code language. Girls tended to stay in school longer than boys and become more fully engaged with a larger society. With more interactions with non-French speakers, women had more opportunity to become bilingual. The ways that language changes show us the ways that people's lives change. Culture changes language, not the other way around."

As one would expect in a region with an old and active port city and many immigrant populations, there are numerous languages still spoken in coastal Louisiana – an essay reissued by the

Left: The legacy of French-speaking forebearers is embedded in surnames, place names, song lyrics and slang. While the number of non-English-speaking communities is in sharp decline, interest in reinvigorating the practice of Cajun French, along with preserving the linguistic customs of other immigrant groups and reviving the languages of Native Americans, is on the rise.

Above: Many folk tales warn the listener of the dangers of encountering the ghosts of pirates who lure them into dark bayous with promises of buried treasure. While honored for his heroism in the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812, Jean Lafitte, pictured here, was also an infamous pirate and smuggler. A six-site national historical park and preserve, protecting the natural and cultural resources of Louisiana's delta region, bears his name.

Louisiana Folklife Program¹ lists, in addition to English and French, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Croatian and Vietnamese. More recent studies add Chinese, Arabic, Haitian and German. Further, numerous dialects of each language are spoken.

A transmitter of culture, language plays an essential role in determining and describing group and individual identity. Thus the interest

among Native Americans to revive their historic languages is unsurprising. Forced to become multi-lingual, tribes lost their distinctive identity to outsiders who assumed – because Native Americans had become ethnically mixed and spoke a French-based, vernacular language – they were Creole, with European or African ancestry.

Traditionally an oral society, tribes preserve history by transmitting stories from generation to generation. The late John Mayeux, a linguist, story-teller and chief of the Bear Clan of the Avogel,² said, “If you have the language, you have the connection with the past.” Language is also the key to the shared myths and legends that are the cornerstone of a people’s culture.

Characters from the murky depths

Traditional Native American stories from Louisiana are

deeply rooted in the natural world. Birds, reptiles, mammals and insects take leading roles in many of the legends that explain natural phenomena, the origins of native peoples and tribal customs.

Other ethnic groups have their own story-telling traditions. While a graduate student in anthropology at Tulane University, Dustin Reuther collected folk tales from French-speaking residents of southern Terrebonne Parish. “Many stories take place in areas that have already vanished or are extremely threatened by coastal land loss,” says Reuther. “Characters often-times are swamp creatures, real or imagined – ghosts of drowned pirates, snakes and the mythical creature Rougarou. Stories were passed down through generations, told at neighborhood barbecues and family gatherings, retold around campfires on

hunting and fishing expeditions. But the old ways are changing. Few people know these stories now. The self-reliant lifestyle of the marsh dweller is hard to maintain these days. The region is not only losing land, it’s losing its population, and along with it, its language and its stories and an entire way of life.”

Take it to the street

It is a way of life that continues to be celebrated, however, even as the roots of its traditions and customs are assaulted by storms that destroy homes, by saltwater intrusion that kills marsh grasses and gardens and trees, and by changes in the economy that pressure people to move.

“For centuries Louisianans have loved to come together for celebrations,” says Teresa Parker Farris, chair of the Louisiana Folklife Commission. “Public spectacle is woven into the fabric of Louisiana. People grow up seeing their parents and grandparents participate in parades and pageanties, and it’s infectious – who doesn’t want to have a good time, eat good food and listen to great music?”

“Coastal Louisiana’s tradition of public celebrations and festivals grew out of the convergence of multiple cultural strains interacting and reinforcing each other and finding new means of expres-



Fecund wetlands are populated with numerous creatures of land, air and water which appear as characters in myths, fables and folk tales. Bears, alligators, squirrels, woodpeckers, fly-catchers, owls, even mosquitos – it seems like every denizen of the wetlands has a role to play in legend or allegory. In an old Choctaw legend, a raccoon teaches a possum not to envy others by tricking him into singeing the hair off his tail.

Jeremy Dumm



Many marsh dwellers talk about their strong ties to family and place, and census records support claims that Louisianans often live close to extended family and move less frequently than other citizens in the country. Participating in customs and festivals is a popular way to share good times and pass traditions down through the generations.

sion,” says Farris. “Spiritual practices provided the original context. Early European settlers were Catholics from France and Spain who brought customs of religious rituals and community celebrations with them. Later arrivals of other Catholic immigrants refreshed and reinforced these social mores while contributing their own culturally flavored interpretations of religion to the mix.”

Although unwilling immigrants, enslaved Africans contributed richly to the evolving coastal culture, enhancing processions and celebrations by sharing their traditions of parades and costuming. In their native tribal communities, Africans had donned masks and colorful dress to dance and sing in recognition of rites-of-passage and other life events.

“Africans easily blended their religious beliefs and practices with Catholicism,” says Farris. “Believing that there are many spirits inhabiting the world, they merged their cosmos of deities with Catholic saints. Their religion, too, professed a belief in an afterlife, that death was a transition to a different realm. Jazz funerals and second line parades derive directly from rites of enslaved African Americans mourning the departure but rejoicing in the liberation of the deceased.”

Residents and newcomers continue to share a certain comfort that Louisianans have with ephemerality of this life. “The attitude of celebrating the moment, of ‘joie de vivre’ permeates the state,” says Farris, herself a transplant from another state. “Colorful, noisy, kinetic – our celebrations demonstrate the significance of community that has built up over centuries.”

New Orleans’ Mardi Gras festival on Fat Tuesday is the city’s largest and best



Let’s parade! While Louisianans look for opportunities to take to the street all year round, Mardi Gras is the most famous celebration, inspiring elaborate floats, masks and costumes. Native American motifs inspire this dancer’s attire of swirling feathers and stylized depictions of birds.

known, but parades occur year-round throughout the urban area. “However, social clubs that stage parades are becoming increasingly aware of weather,” says Farris. “Some have moved their annual parade date to avoid possible hurricane threats. And paying for repairs to weather-damaged homes or cars can curtail a family’s budget for taking part in these celebrations.”

“We fear losing the physical space of our grandparents”

Reuther observes that plants, traditionally sources of food, medicine and craft

materials, are disappearing from the wetlands. “Sassafras trees, the source of filé for gumbo, are dying out. The range of palmettos used for basketry is retreating northward. Saltwater intrusion prevents growing gardens that used to feed large families – but the families are moving away. Boat-building tools are shelved; no one is building boats by hand any more.”

Louisiana’s culture will survive, but it will also continue to change as the environment decays and demographics shift. The capacity of the marshes to support a subsistence lifestyle is diminishing. Even as land mass shrinks, large corporations and private clubs have laid boundaries in the wetlands that ex-

clude the non-paying marsh dweller from hunting and fishing. Soon the people who fed themselves by harvesting bounty from the water and the land will disappear. Handcrafted utensils made from local materials will decay, and the skills to produce them will be forgotten. The small percentage of acreage that restoration projects can restore or maintain will sustain memory of an ancestral landscape and provide a physical link to the past, but will not return the environment to its past state nor preserve the lifestyle it supported in past decades.

“Land loss affects musicians just like it does any other family member,” says Fontenot. “Although we’re likely to lose unique bayou communities, those physical places on

the fringe, Cajun music will persist. It will be played in different places, but the music will help us to remember and appreciate what we had. Why should we care about saving the coast if we are not saving the culture that it produced?” **WM**

¹http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Virtual_Books/Guide_to_State/dillard.html

²<https://www.avoyellestoday.com/news-lifestyle/who-are-avoyel>

“For us, home is more than the building you live in. It’s everything in the environment that surrounds you. If you leave, you become someone else. You are no longer the same person. No longer the same people... That would kill our culture and our future entirely.” Rosina Philippe, an elder and spokeswoman for the Atakapas-Ishak/Chawasha tribe, as quoted by Bob Marshall in *The Lens*, <https://thelensnola.org/2016/12/27/native-americans-of-grand-bayou-seeking-help-for-homeland/>



Copyright: Diane Huhlin



WHEN WHERE WE LIVE VANISHES

Leaving the Bayou, Looking for Home

“If I had asked my grandparents why nature is important, they would have thought it a strange question,” says Philip Frey, a historian descended from 18th century Acadian immigrants. “Embracing the natural world was intrinsic to them; they loved nature for nature’s sake. It wasn’t like in the movies; they never made dramatic speeches about it. Fishing, my grandpa might point to the sunrise and say, ‘Ain’t that pretty?’ to wake up my eyes to the world around me. I think because he felt most at home in the outdoors, and therefore most in touch with his feelings, he used this time to teach me lessons about truth and honesty as well as skills for living on the bayou. We didn’t talk much; it scared the wildlife.

He just gave the lesson and then shut up, letting the swamp’s silence reinforce what he said. Deep conversations happened outside.”

With traditions strongly rooted in a subsistence lifestyle, coastal Louisianans have arguably remained more intimately connected to the outdoors than people in other regions. The wetlands’ ecology and environment have strongly influenced their character and identity. Frey says, “The landscape created my ancestors even as they changed it.”

Everyday disasters

The dramatic changes to Louisiana’s coast over the past decades threaten its capacity to support habitation. Some places are swamped, other places have literally

Living in the midst of the natural beauty of the wetlands, coastal residents – like people everywhere – can become inured to their landscape until nudged into awareness by a particularly vivid sunrise, an unusually exquisite flower, the sighting of a rare animal, or the comment of a companion. Seemingly timeless and eternal, the wetlands have exposed their fragility and vulnerability in recent decades as the works of man have sliced them into pieces and the forces of nature threaten to swamp them completely.

washed away, but the menaces of the environmental crisis are more far-reaching and insidious even than loss of land. “Weather events do not have to be wide-spread disasters to have deleterious effects,” says Kristina Peterson, a social scientist



Jeremy Dunn

and co-founder of the Lowlander Center. “A local afternoon downpour can pose threats to human health and well-being, obstructing emergency vehicles and delaying access to health and safety services. When flooding increases in intensity, it can prohibit evacuation of low-lying areas. Moreover, many areas in the bayou region rely on septic systems. Frequent flooding raises the water table, which prevents wastewater in septic systems from draining properly. The wastewater contaminates sources of drinking water, spreading disease.”

The historical remoteness and relative inaccessibility of bayou communities, often populated by members of an extended family, have increased bayou people’s interdependence and strengthened identification with place. “Such a strong connection to home increases the trauma of detaching

when home becomes uninhabitable,” says Shirley Laska, professor emerita of sociology at the University of New Orleans and co-founder of the Lowlander Center.

Nevertheless, for decades some coastal residents have responded to changes in environmental conditions by moving, choosing not to rebuild after a storm but to relocate to higher ground. “Neighborhoods are more than just family now,” says Jean Landry, program manager for The Nature Conservancy on Grand Isle. “People have had to move to find work. Families are spread across a wider geographic area than they used to be. Along with the wetlands, family traditions are disappearing.”

But some people do not or cannot move because of economic restraints, dependence on place-based employment, or dedication to ancestral

land. For Native Americans, demonstrating continuous residence on tribal land may be required to become federally recognized.

An inescapable future

The inevitability of extreme weather events, further land loss and other environmental changes is forcing coastal Louisianans to consider their options. Resettlement is one response, but despite the perils, many residents are committed to remaining in their homes as long as possible. Recent programs encourage a holistic approach to flood risk, defining flood-proofing not only as making structural adaptations to homes and businesses so as to withstand flooding or to avoid it altogether, but to plan for the social, economic and environmental consequences that inevitably accompany disasters. “Enhancing a community’s resilience – its ability to recover from trauma, to manage the stress and pain of living through difficult experiences – increases its capacity to adjust to change,” says Laska. “People who understand the challenges they face, who understand their options, who learn about issues and articulate their opinions and become involved – people, in short, who are active citizens

A weather event need not be a headliner to affect life in coastal Louisiana. Sudden, intense rain showers, saturated ground and a rising sea level pose chronic problems in daily life, affecting sanitation, architectural integrity, transportation, infrastructure and a host of other issues that residents of higher ground seldom have to address.



Creative Commons



– have the skills they need to adapt to the future.”

Laska acknowledges that community engagement is not a practice deeply ingrained in the social structure of coastal Louisiana. “Connected to extended families, many people have not felt the need to be involved in the affairs of their towns or parishes,” she says. “Now people are seeing the importance of participating in decision-making and the benefits of making their experiences and visions known to the authorities responsible for developing strategies to cope with future conditions.”

Numerous private and governmental entities have undertaken educating people about the science and the politics of coastal environmental issues.¹ Some concentrate on developing a community’s sense of collective power and capacity for self-determination; others focus on cultivating well-informed youth with an aptitude for creative problem-solving and decision-making. “More people knowledgeable about coastal

erosion and environmental pollution are showing up at meetings and monitoring restoration plans to make sure they meet our community’s needs,” says the Reverend Tyrone Edwards, a Baptist pastor and founder of a community development organization in the Plaquemines Parish village of Phoenix, “but it’s the involvement of young people dedicated to becoming good environmental stewards who give me hope “

Common ground

“The stronger sense you have of who you are, the better foundation you have to make decisions about what to do and where to go,” says Peterson. To that end, she believes it is extremely important to build up a cultural capacity to think about future choices. How do Louisianans strengthen their cultural capacity? “Through music, food and religion,” she says. Participating in events that reinforce cultural practices and promote sharing stories, whether

Rebuild? Elevate? Move? Homeowners on Louisiana’s coast are conscious of the increasing threats to their property and the odds against saving their land. Coastal restoration can slow wetland deterioration in some areas and could rebuild them in others, but it’s too little, too late, for many. Citizen participation in planning helps scientists, engineers and government agencies establish priorities and develop strategies to address the coastal crisis.

it be a backyard barbecue or a religious service or a national convocation, allows people to learn how others similar to themselves have made choices and adapted to challenging situations.

Louisianans who face displacement and emigration are beginning to talk with other people vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. “Alaska, the South Pacific islands, Bangladesh,

Forecasts of sea-level rise and predictions of flood depths are guiding local building codes and zoning regulations. Raising houses on stilts above anticipated flood levels and constructing houses that float are two methods Louisianans are using to address threats predicted under future conditions.



Nigeria – these are all places where populations traditionally reliant on the bounty of the land and the water face losing their homes,” says Peterson. “How does that affect their sense of identity? How are they figuring out moving forward?”

One conversation involves the importance of preserving traditional plants, foods and medicines. In Louisiana, individuals as well as academic institutions, including Nicholls State University in Thibodaux and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, are collecting and cultivating seeds and rootstock of native plants. Recognizing the role that plants will play in maintaining the biodiversity of all creatures forced inland, Pointe au Chien tribal leaders, the Dardars, are spearheading a community

greenhouse project as well as raising key species in their own garden. A volunteer outside of the coastal zone is raising saplings to see if trees historically found in Plaquemines Parish remain vital farther north. “As conditions change, what plants can adapt to rising temperatures?” asks Peterson. “What food can we grow, and how do we use these foods in recipes? Conversations about food and plants become part of the knowledge moving up the watershed and shared among people coping with change.”

Finding new homes

Ultimately people living in low-lying areas will have to move. Although efforts are directed to delay relocation as long as possible, the state of Louisiana has identified coastal areas where buy-outs are recommended and

is assessing the capacity of parishes to support buyouts, building elevation programs and relocation with state funding. Some communities discuss moving together, hoping to maintain traditions and family and neighborly ties. “But relocating as a community is seldom a viable option,” says Laska. “More likely an extended family can move together, or through an informal arrangement neighbors might relocate to the same area.”

People leaving the coast will go somewhere, and that place will have to offer employment opportunities, affordable housing and a community receptive to newcomers. And as did previous migrants to Louisiana, these new refugees are likely to find comfort among people

Humans will not be the only species from the Louisiana wetlands looking for new homes in the coming years. Indigenous plants may not survive the increasing salinity in water and soil, or the higher temperatures anticipated under climate change. Individuals and institutions are working now to propagate and preserve these species, experiment with extending their growing range, and protect the biodiversity that depends on coastal vegetation.





Copyright Diane Huhn

respectful of traditional values and who share a religious identity, denominational differences notwithstanding. “A large percentage of Louisiana’s population describe themselves as Christian,” says Peterson. “Their faith provides a context for helping the sojourner.”

No matter how welcoming the community, people relocating from the coast could discover finding an appropriate new home to be difficult. Inviting land is already occupied, and parishes on higher ground throughout the state are confronting their own environmental problems. “Toxic waste dumps and other environmental contaminations; water system shortcomings; infrastructure disrepair; and community health risks, including poverty and lack of health and social services, disqualify many destinations,” says Peterson. “We’ve been so focused on the crisis on our coast that we have neglected problems in other parts of Louisiana. As peo-

ple move north, addressing threats to people’s health and well-being throughout the state becomes increasingly urgent.”

“Adaptation can cause some communities to bear the brunt for other communities,” Laska says. “When spillways open to avert flooding on the Mississippi River, residents downstream have to cope with the influx of fresh water. Also, people forced to relocate can pose issues for the places they move to. In extreme weather, adaptation may become a crisis for the receiving area.”

A slow retreat

It is still possible to gaze across the coastal landscape and find the beauty that Frey’s grandfather prompted him to notice. In a boat, the vegetation may seem thick and endless. The fishing’s still good, and sportsmen still flock to the region for premier outdoor experiences. Frey still holds important conversations with his son outdoors.

The demise of this environment would be all the more swift without efforts to restore the coast. Restoration projects, including those conducted by CWPPRA, will never completely replicate the delta that was centuries in the making, but they can stem the rate of loss, and in some places, reconstruct a remembered landscape. Coastal restoration contributes to maintaining natural resources and environmental benefits that Louisianans have relied on for generations and to prolonging a way of life for as long as possible. Coastal Louisianans are using the time bought through restoration not merely to savor their inherited life style, but to prepare for change and develop skills for adapting to an uncertain future. **WM**

*¹For a discussion of eight state and local programs implemented since 2016, see Laska’s forthcoming book, *Louisiana’s Response to Extreme Weather – A Coastal State’s Adaptation Challenges and Successes* (Springer, Open Access).*

WATERMARKS INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN FORET

Director of the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center,
Houma, Louisiana

WATERMARKS: Things change everywhere, all the time. Why should we be concerned about preserving Louisiana's coastal culture?

FORET: In coastal Louisiana we live in a very unique intersection of culture and environment, where each has shaped the other. Even with the environmental challenges we face today, we are lucky to live here.

I grew up on the bayou. My father embodied the Cajun lifestyle, relying on the bayou for food and living in communion with the environment. He taught me to fish and hunt and to appreciate the natural world around us. I believe future generations should have those same opportunities of living in this magical place and carrying on an ever-evolving way of bayou life.

WATERMARKS: Do Louisianans have an unusual attachment to "place?"

FORET: I think our sense of place is strongly tied to family – are we connected to southern Louisiana, or to our family that has lived here for generations? This region has fewer people who leave and never come back than any other place in the country – and I don't believe it's only because we have great food.

Memories of my grandmother connect me to place. Simple activities like feeding my chickens or building a cistern bring her

to mind and link me to her way of life on the bayou. Though the same in design and function, the two cisterns characterize how conditions have changed: Her water was delicious! But I'll have to test mine for air-borne pollutants before I drink it. Even so, I'll have a back-up source of water if a hurricane takes out the community water line for any length of time.

I don't know if we're more connected to our land now than our ancestors were. The Acadians were political refugees; we talk of becoming climate refugees. But that's nothing new; coastal Louisianans have been relocating to avoid storms and flooding for generations. It has been a natural process without any large government program or public expenditure, just a son moving to the community north of his home town, his son moving north of that. Knowing this should empower us – we've done this before – but unfortunately we have a shallow understanding of our own history.

Our ancestors learned to adapt, and we'll have to do the same. I don't know what it will look like, but adapting is what bayou people have done and will do again.

WATERMARKS: Can coastal people maintain cultural identity in the face of so much change and uncertainty?

FORET: The first phase is to help people become aware of the importance of their culture.



When people live within their culture, they don't think about it – it's like breathing air, or swimming in water if you're a fish.

Through the Bayou Culture Collaborative, a program initiated by the Louisiana Folklore Society and the Louisiana Folklife Program to encourage coastal communities' cultural awareness, I've suggested packing a "trunk of traditions," putting in the trunk the cultural practices we need to be happy. If I pack the trunk I'd put in our oral traditions, our own history as we know and understand it. I'd pack Louisiana French, how to throw a cast net and how to make roux. Many traditions involve food – growing it, catching it, cooking it and eating it. Coastal Louisianans, wherever they go, will continue to cook roux and gumbo.

We have to figure out which traditions are relevant to move them forward. Should we put fur trapping in the trunk? Although it's interesting, it's not that useful to this generation. Do we teach how to strip thistles to make them edible?

How to pick pecans? Maybe we put into the trunk what will help us survive in an uncertain environment: how to garden, how to catch seafood, how to use medicinal plants.

Maybe we put some things in the trunk simply out of respect for our parents' and grandparents' way of life, to preserve our identity as Cajuns as distinct from, say, Amish. I want things in the trunk that I think are important for people to remember, but if they don't work for someone else, that's okay. You can look at the clothes in the trunk, try them on. If they fit, wear them, but if not, simply put them back into the trunk. Just don't throw them away.

Traditions morph to become useful. For example, in the past the terms "up the bayou" and "down the bayou" referred to boat travel. When roads were built on high ground bordering the bayous, the terms meant

"go north" or "go south." Now on Facebook you see "UTB" and "DTB." The terms remain relevant but have changed in contemporary use.

I think our cultural traditions are a link to our mental health. If they don't help people to adjust to traumas related to storms and relocation, to adapt to changing circumstances, to remember who they are, why should we maintain them? We can't lock culture in. The bayous are far less isolated and far more connected to the world than they used to be, but that doesn't change how to make a roux.

WATERMARKS: Do coastal restoration efforts like CWPPRA matter, given the displacement of people and culture?

FORET: Absolutely. By addressing the scientific and engineering aspects of wetland loss, CWPPRA is

playing a major role in shaping Louisiana's future. Now it's time for others to step forward – the social scientists, the historians, the anthropologists, the language teachers – to preserve our coastal identity: our food, our music, our language, our stories – the things that make us who we are. Our lives will be very different in 40 or 50 years, but understanding our history and practicing our folkways will help us adapt to future changes.

WM

Music, food, festivals and strong family ties are among the elements that define coastal Louisiana's culture. Underlying all cultural expression, however, is the land and the landscape that have nurtured and inspired coastal residents for centuries. As that land undergoes profound change, preserving the cultural identity that developed within it relies on becoming aware of it and maintaining its relevant features through transitional times.



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
NEW ORLEANS DISTRICT, CORPS OF ENGINEERS
P.O. BOX 60267
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA 70160-0267

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
NEW ORLEANS, LA
PERMIT NO. 80

A mythical creature stalks Louisiana's swamps. Some describe it as having the body of a man with a head of a wolf or dog. Some say it can take the form of a rabbit or a green-eyed cat, or can make itself invisible altogether but still able to moan and howl and chase you out of the house. Like werewolves, a rougarou may bite you and, by drawing blood, transfer its curse to you. Once infected, you may appear normal, although weak, during sunlit hours, only to transform into a monster at night.

Cajun children were warned to behave lest the rougarou came after you. Catholics were cautioned to observe Lent lest the rougarou came to kill you. Tourists were told never to stop on the bayou road at night; that ghostly figure telling you where a treasure lies could be the rougarou.

Nowadays the rougarou may take the form of a nutria, destroying wetlands by devouring the vegetation. The rougarou may rise up from the swamp to pursue you if you carelessly litter the water. The rougarou is always skirting the edges of gatherings, gliding among unsuspecting revelers at festivals, sliding into and out of sight in the dense greenery of southern Louisiana. Watch out!

