

WATER MARKS

Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration News

January 2014 Number 48



Highlighted areas indicate locations of CWPPRA projects throughout coastal Louisiana



People of the Coastal Wetlands

Resilient communities living, working and surviving together

January 2014

Number 48

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.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE'S COVER . . .

Map of CWPPRA projects in coastal Louisiana, U.S. Geological Survey, National Wetlands Research Center

CWPPRA agencies work with Kimberly Walden, Cultural Director and Historic Preservation Officer of the Sovereign Nation of the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, to protect sites of religious and cultural significance. Photo: Holly L. Martien, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Jure Slavic and Nikola Vekic staff the Croatian American Society's oyster booth at the Plaquemines Parish Seafood Festival. Photo: Anita Cognevich, Croatian American Society

A fisherman of Vietnamese descent continues the immigrant tradition of shrimping. Photo: LSU Sea Grant College Program

Page 2 photo: Holly L. Martien, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

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The editor of *WaterMarks* wishes to express appreciation to the many people who generously contributed their time and expertise to this issue, especially the first people of Louisiana – the American Indians; and Dr. Don Davis, Thu Bui, and Dr. Rex Caffey, members of the Louisiana Sea Grant team, for their untiring effort to provide accurate information.

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:

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THE CHITIMACHA OF LOUISIANA: "WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE."

Traditions of Stewardship and Community Inspire Hope for Coastal Louisiana

For centuries, the presence of indigenous peoples in the marshes bordering the Gulf of Mexico ebbed and flowed in response to the dynamics of the Mississippi River. They took shelter in oak

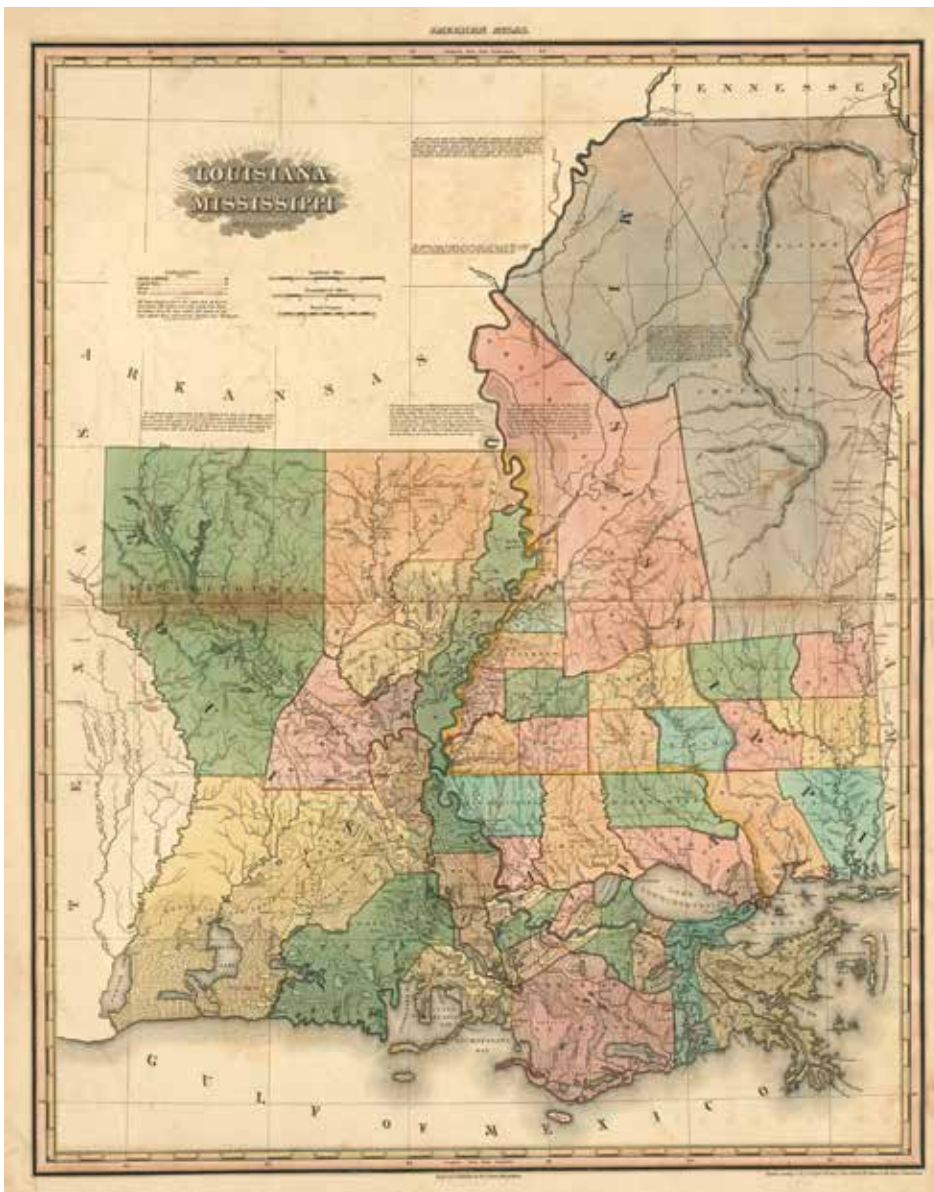
groves on high ridges and found ready food in marshes teeming with fish and game. While able to adapt and thrive in this ever-changing natural environment, within a span of decades following Europeans' arrival

in the "new world" Native Americans were decimated by war, disease and exile. Sanctioned thefts – taxation, forced sales, swindles and squatters – robbed them of ancestral lands. Today, the thief of coastal land is subsidence, unchallenged since the marsh-nurturing Mississippi River was imprisoned behind levees and dams.

Cultural resources disappear as land vanishes

Leading the fight against this modern-day land theft is the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration

This map, published in 1820, shows regions of Louisiana and Mississippi that were home to Native American tribes: the Choctaw and Chickasaw countries (gray section in the northeast); the regions of the Natchitoches (western green area), the Opelousas (yellow in southwest), and the Attakapas (green and yellow in the south-southwest). In the mid-1800s the Chitimacha sued the United States for title to tribal lands, and a government decree designated 1,062 acres in St. Mary's Parish (yellow section in south-southwest) as belonging to the Chitimacha. In ensuing years the tribe's holdings were reduced to 260 acres, but modern-day tribal leaders have pushed to reacquire the original land and add contiguous acreage to the reservation, increasing its size by more than 1,000 acres.



Act (CWPPRA), and standing beside CWPPRA to represent her tribe in this fight is Kimberly Walden, Cultural Director and Historic Preservation Officer of the Sovereign Nation of the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana.

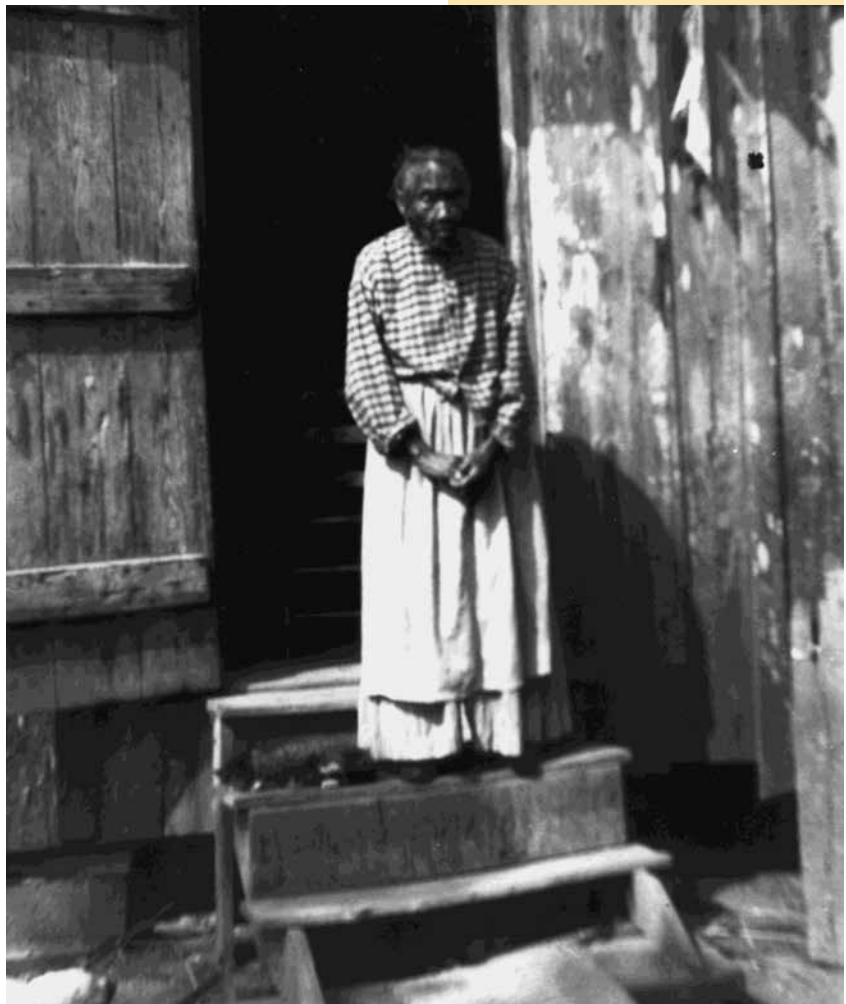
Thousands of years ago, the Chitimacha ruled the coastal region. Archaeological evidence indicates that the tribe has continuously occupied the Bayou Teche area since at least 800 B.C. “Our ancestral lands encompass all of coastal Louisiana,” says Walden. “At one time we were the most powerful tribe on the northern Gulf Coast; as many as 20,000 people fished, farmed, and raised families in villages throughout the region’s rich and fertile marshes.”

Land theft by man and nature has reduced the geographic footprint of today’s Chitimacha Tribe, but generations of Chitimacha have left a cultural legacy across the entire Louisiana coast. Walden and others like her are vigilant in their efforts to protect this legacy.

“We are preserving our heritage by teaching our children the language of our ancestors, sharing stories of our elders, cultivating river

cane and continuing our basket-making tradition, and protecting culturally important sites,” said Walden. “To have a voice in the conservation planning process, Louisiana’s four federally recognized tribes – the Chitimacha, Jena Band of Choctaw, Coushatta and Tunica-Biloxi – formed a council at the invitation of the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Tribal Conservation Advisory Council helps to identify significant cultural resources, educate landowners on the importance of those resources and protect areas that are of historic, religious, and cultural significance to these tribes.”

Louisiana has the highest population of American Indian tribes and organizations in the Southeast. Of the four federally recognized tribes in the state, only the Chitimacha has lived continuously in the coastal region. Four coastal tribes are among the 10 state-recognized tribes: the Point-au-Chien Indian Tribe, United Houma Nation, Isle de Jean Charles Band and Grand Caillou/Dulac Band. Additionally, at least eight tribal community-based organizations represent residents who trace their ancestry back to indigenous people.



An American Indian woman living in Louisiana’s wetlands circa 1907. Photo provided by Dr. Don Davis of LA Sea Grant. Original from the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. John R Swanton Collection

In her capacity as Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Walden advises federal agencies and parishes of sites and artifacts potentially at risk in CWPPRA restoration project areas. “We might make recommendations to avoid impacting a village site or disturbing burial grounds,” says Walden. “On occasion we suggest alternate restoration techniques to prevent damaging historic or sacred sites, or share information such as the location of shell middens that might make a certain restoration method preferable to others. Our work with CWPPRA agencies gives us an opportunity to protect the land that is sacred to our people.”

Culture and identity linked to the land

Awareness of coastal erosion’s threat is widespread

among Louisiana’s Native Americans; deterioration of protective wetlands and the disappearance of barrier islands increase the vulnerability of those who have lived near the Gulf for centuries. “Used to be, when a hurricane blew through, it might cause some damage, flood our homes,” says Chuckie Verdin, chairman of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. “We’d just clean up and rebuild. But with land loss, there’s nothing to come back to. The land’s just going away.”

Once self-sufficient, communities of Native American ancestry are struggling to maintain their cultural identity as they lose traditional foods, medicines and sources of livelihoods along with their homes and land. “Living along the waterways, we always made our living by fishing, oystering and crabbing; by farming and raising cattle,”

says Verdin. “Saltwater intrusion has crippled our way of life. There’s no place to raise cattle or farm outside the levees. Marshes where we used to hunt and trap animals are open water now. As people grow up, there’s no place to build homes. People move away. In time, we will cease to exist as a community.”

Verdin supports rebuilding barrier islands, undertaken by such CWPPRA projects as East Timbalier Island Restoration (TE-25, TE-30 and TE-40) and West Belle Pass Barrier Headland Restoration (TE-52), that replenish sandy beaches and restore back marshes. Strengthening this first line of defense against the erosive powers of storm surge and wave action is an important tool in protecting the lands of Louisiana’s native people.

Verdin also supports plans for diversions, such as CWPPRA projects West Bay

The Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to consult with federally recognized American Indian tribes regarding the religious and cultural significance of ancestral, aboriginal, or ceded tribal lands. Working with Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) Task Force agencies on a government-to-government basis, the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana is vigilant in its efforts to save and protect coastal ancestral lands.





Cultivating the river cane used in Chitimacha basketry maintains this cultural facet of the tribe. Since 2001 the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has worked with the tribe through a consultative process to propagate and establish on tribal land the varieties of river cane traditionally used by Chitimacha basket weavers.

Sediment Diversion (MR-03) and Bohemia Mississippi River Reintroduction (BS-15). “Some fishermen object to diversions’ effects on shrimp and oysters. But if there is no fresh water coming into the marshes, they just erode and vanish more quickly,” says Verdin.

Theresa Dardar, a Pointe-au-Chien council member, recommends expanding restoration planning to protect more areas and include different ideas. “Restoration involves more than levees and flood gates,” she says. “Those measures leave out bayou areas like ours. Simple practices – like elevating

homes, or shielding cemeteries and mounds from erosion – could make a difference.”

Tapping into native knowledge

In their fight to preserve Louisiana’s wetlands, restoration professionals are increasingly incorporating native peoples’ traditional ecological knowledge of the coastal environment into project planning and design. Coupling remote-sensing technology with local communities’ insight into the wetlands’ sustainable components and vulnerable attributes, the University of New Orleans undertook SCI-T.E.K., a project of collabora-

tive mapping. “Because trappers and fishermen go out in the wetlands every day, they know how tides change, how currents run, what plants flourish, where old, submerged structures lie in the waterways,” says Shirley Laska, professor emerita of sociology at the University of New Orleans. “They depend on knowing these things to earn their living.”

Seeking to increase their influence on conservation issues, in 2012 four

state-recognized Indian tribes founded the First Peoples’ Conservation Council of Louisiana. With the goal of becoming a model for restoring native lands, water and air, the council facilitates communication and cooperation among tribes and restoration agencies. “Through the council we can work directly with state and federal agencies to identify and solve natural resource issues on tribal lands,” says Dardar, who serves as the council’s vice president.

The council encourages tribal members to participate in restoration activities. “In all the communities involved in First People,” says Kristina

Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor in coastal Louisiana, “you will find people expressing their stewardship of the land by attending meetings and becoming knowledgeable about protection and restoration plans.”

Tribal members’ sense of stewardship permeates their relationships to their community as well as to the environment. Long-standing traditions of independence and mutual support increase their resilience and survival capabilities. “Following the hurricanes of the past decade,” says Dardar, “we helped each other rebuild, just as our ancestors used to do. Almost everyone came back to the community.”

Old ways forge a future path

Along with Louisiana’s wetlands, native coastal peoples and their traditional way of life are at risk of vanishing from the Earth. “Asked ‘why stay when you are at such risk,’ Indians reply that they stay to honor and defend the ecosystem; they see their role as advocates for the environment,” says Peterson. “They say, ‘If we don’t stay and demonstrate the importance of the places where we live, there will be no one to fight for them. They will be gone.’”

“If we can be viewed as a disposable people, with our lands left to perish and our

way of life with them, who is next?” asks Albert Naquin, chief of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha Indians.

As climate change exacerbates conditions of land loss, sea-level rise and disruptions in food sources, coastal residents across the globe will confront the issues that Louisiana’s indigenous peoples face today. Their community traditions may provide insight for dealing with environmental change. “Engaged in becoming as resilient and creative as possible until they have to move,” says Peterson, “Native Americans encourage us to think about what we are doing now to prepare for the time when relocations become inevitable.”

“We have strong ties to land,” says Walden. “In the past, we were forced to surrender almost all of our land, but that does not mean we surrendered our culture, our sacred sites, or our traditions. Today, we are working to protect our heritage. CWPPRA is helping.” **WM**



Colors, shapes and patterns distinguish traditional Chitimacha basketry. Using techniques dating back hundreds, if not thousands, of years, the Chitimacha gather, strip, dye and weave native river cane into mats or containers that once were used to hold fruits, fish and other foodstuffs. Christine Paul, pictured at left, was one in a long line of the tribe’s basket weavers. Photo used by permission of the McIlhenny Company Archives, Avery Island, Louisiana

"WAR WAS HELL. HEAVEN IS HERE"

Wetlands' Abundance Supports Vietnamese Seeking New Homes and Livelihoods

Pierre Le of Lafayette describes himself as a simple guy. In 1975, at the close of the Viet Nam war, the 33-year-old refugee came to the United States. Comfortable in weather similar to what he had known in his native land, Le set about rebuilding his life in Louisiana. "I restudy everything," Le says. "I wash cars

during the day, go to school at night."

In the late 20th century, immigrants from Viet Nam became the newest community to invigorate the rich cultural montage of Louisiana. Between 1975 and 2000, approximately 25,000 Vietnamese refugees settled in Louisiana, where

the subtropical climate and proximity to water reminded them of home. Strangers to American culture and facing a formidable language barrier, many found their willingness to work hard won them

Plying the Gulf waters off the Louisiana coast, fisherman Robert Nguyen, of Vietnamese descent, pulls in the nets on his shrimp boat.



jobs in the fishing industry. By 2010, one out of every three commercial seafood workers in the Gulf region was Vietnamese, and 80 percent of employed Vietnamese Americans worked in jobs connected to the seafood industry.

The arc of Le's success exemplifies the journey of many Vietnamese immigrants in Louisiana. Within a year he gave up washing cars and went to work in the oil industry. At the same time he became involved with Vietnamese boat people who began to arrive in 1978, helping them find jobs fishing, mending nets and welding. "We work hard to survive," Le says. "Year by year, we see opportunity, rise up step by step."

Shrimping is arduous, physical work, but in Louisiana's bountiful waters the Vietnamese took advantage of the opportunities it offered. "We support each other like a big family – that's the only way to make it," says Joseph Doan. Doan, now manager of a seafood dock in Intra-coastal City, emigrated from Viet Nam 38 years ago. "I am grateful for the opportunities this nation gave me. Now, if I know something, I put it back into the community to help other people. That's how I live life – reaching out, giving a hand. We are a small community. We live together, work together,

and we're going to make it together."

"It's Mother Nature – what can you do?"

Working on the water and dependent on natural resources for their livelihood, Vietnamese fishermen have seen the environment change over the past 20 years. "Fishermen understand the connection between healthy estuaries, shrimping, and economics," says Thu Bui, a descendent of Vietnamese immigrants who works as a marine agent with LSU's Ag Center and the Louisiana Sea Grant program. "Coastal wetlands fulfill essential needs of shrimp in early stages of their life cycle, providing nursery grounds and food and shelter. The health and abundance of adult shrimp are directly related to the health of the wetlands. Coastal restoration is important to the Vietnamese community because wetlands created through the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) may become new nursery grounds for shrimp."

"This year, crab, shrimp, fish — fishermen are not catching a lot of fish," says Doan. "Is it weather? Oil spill? The Earth is changing – what is causing that? We worry about flood. If a big storm hits, like Katrina or Ike, we would lose everything."



LSU Sea Grant College Program

Each ethnic group settling in coastal Louisiana has added its cooking techniques and flavors to the region's culinary traditions. Abundant fresh seafood provides the base for many of the dishes in Louisiana's storied cuisine.

Land loss exacerbates the danger of storms by destroying expansive, wave-calming marshes. Thus, CWPPRA projects are crucial not only to sustaining Louisiana's fisheries but also to protecting the region's people and resources. "Habitat restoration creates a buffer to hurricane storms and wave action that affect the coast's immigrant populations," says Bui.

Bui's understanding of Vietnamese culture and language facilitates outreach to increase community engagement with coastal issues. CWPPRA relies on local input to develop projects that best serve affected residents, and invites citizens to participate in project planning and

selection. Bui encourages Vietnamese fishermen to become involved. “In the past few years the Vietnamese have become better educated about coastal problems and potential solutions,” says Bui. “They see firsthand how change is impacting their environment and have modified their behaviors to become better environmental stewards. They are willing to do their part; they just need some help understanding what they can do to make a difference.”

Giuseppe Anthony Tran, parish coordinator at Mary, Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church in New Orleans, cites cultural attributes that will sustain the Vietnamese immigrant community in the face of change. “We have gone through so many exoduses, migrations and evacuations due to war times in the past that endurance has become part of our immune system,” he says. “We are a people who can adapt and adjust our lives to any situation.”

“We don’t know when Mother Nature will hit,” says Doan, “so be good. Live good life. Live life honestly. Take care of each other.” As they become increasingly aware of the ecological crisis endangering the foundation of their early success in the United States, the Vietnamese of coastal Louisiana are learning to expand their stewardship to include Mother Nature. **WM**



LSU Sea Grant College Program

First settling along the Gulf coast nearly 40 years ago, Vietnamese immigrants prospered by undertaking hard work in Louisiana’s seafood industry. Observing how wetland loss is threatening the resource base upon which their community built its success has inspired appreciation of CWPPRA’s restoration projects.



“Filling Oyster Sacks” by Marian Brister Martinez. Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 inches. Used by permission of the artist.

world. Many were drawn to Louisiana; its latitude, weather and coastal environment felt familiar to them. Fertile land between the river and bayou supported farming, and the bountiful waters sustained livelihoods in fishing. Recognizing the profitability of commerce in oysters, the entrepreneurial Croatians became dominant in the industry by developing cultivation techniques and undertaking the hard labor of growing and harvesting the bivalves. “They came with little or nothing in their pockets,” says Dave Cvitanovich, a Louisiana oysterman of Croatian descent, “but with hard work, they made a good living for themselves.”

“WE ARE SURVIVORS; IT’S IN OUR BLOOD.”

Coastal Louisiana’s Croatian Community

When Louisiana artist Marian Brister Martinez remembers her grandmother, she pictures her wearing a babushka with a shovel in her hand. “She came from a family that grew olives and grapes in the hills of coastal Croatia,” Martinez says. “When she came to Louisiana, she continued

doing what she was used to – working hard outdoors every day, cultivating her orange grove, managing her packing house and tending her flowers.”

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants from the Adriatic country of Croatia were looking to better their lives in the new

No strangers to hardship

Like all coastal residents, Croatian Americans have suffered from the natural disasters that periodically sweep over the land – hurricanes that wipe out homes and businesses, freezes that kill the citrus groves, fluctuations in salinity that destroy oyster beds. “Disasters make us tougher,” says Barbara Oustalet, an officer in the Croatian American Society based in Belle Chasse, Louisiana. “Our ancestors were survivors, and that characteristic continues in us today. It’s in our blood.”



Lane Lefort

Two Cajun friends, Earl Melancon, Distinguished Service Professor of Biological Sciences at Nicholls State University (left) and Buddy Daisy, owner of Daisy Seafood (right), were interviewed for CWPPRA's oral history project (<http://lacoast.gov/new/GetInvolved/DandM.aspx>). In weaving the tale of being Louisiana oystermen they discuss the relationship between oysters and ever-changing conditions in the wetlands. "As oysters go, so goes the estuary," says Dr. Melancon.

When I was a child, we lost our home twice. My parents did not dwell on it; each time they rebuilt and continued their life in Buras."

Time and again, disasters force these residents to decide whether to rebuild or retreat from the coastal marshes. People with portable jobs might move to higher ground – even three feet offers a sense of safety. But those whose livelihoods are tied to the water may not have that choice. Martinez grew up in Triumph, a close-knit Croatian American levee-based community in the Mississippi River delta south of Buras. "In 1962 a hard freeze killed the citrus trees. In 1965 Hurricane Betsy wiped us out again. In 1969 Triumph disappeared – Hurricane Camille obliterated the landscape, leaving nothing except telephone poles, road signs, and a few trees. The houses were gone. Many people didn't return, but my father's business served marine industries and my parents chose to stay."

Martinez's family has started over three times. "The first time it's a lot of shock

and grief," she says. "The second time, grief and disappointment. But you have the experience of living through it and you develop a game plan. It's never fun – actually it's quite awful – but you learn the best way, the easiest and most affordable way, to rebound."

Martinez believes projects conducted under the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) contribute to the preservation of Louisiana's Croatian community. "I've witnessed the hardships and joys of living in a coastal environment; it's a unique place to live," says Martinez. "While providing a service to our nation, CWPPRA helps the local culture preserve their sense of place. Its projects give the next generation a chance to continue."

Confronting a disaster of a different order

While hurricane winds, storm surges and temperature swings happen quickly and episodically, the disaster of coastal land loss is continuous and gradual. "Anyone from this

area remembers a time when there was a lot more land mass outside the levees," says Chris Leopold, state representative for the district encompassing Plaquemines Parish west of the Mississippi River, "when there was a different footprint of the estuary."

Cvitanovich catalogs the changes he has seen over the course of his lifetime. "Land subsiding. Water table rising. Salt water advancing. Marshes disappearing. When I was growing up the bayou was peaceful, the marsh grass vast and thick. I could go anywhere in a small boat. Now it's open water."

Martinez recalls childhood trips with her family to camp on a barrier island. "We had a mental map of the way through the wetlands. We knew that environment like the back of our hand. Now you need a compass to get out to the islands. The marsh has vanished—it's open water now. We've lost so many landmarks the only thing left to guide us back to the marina is a large flagpole the parish erected thirty years ago."

To help people connect with CWPPRA coastal restoration efforts, the exhibit *"I Remember ..."* CWPPRA *Personal Reflections: Environmental Portraits and Oral Histories of Louisiana's Coastal Wetlands Stakeholders* combines recorded stories from wetland stewards with art. Photographer Lane Lefort and painter Marian Brister Martinez contributed art work that captures the people of Louisiana and the unique habitat, history and culture that CWPPRA projects protect. "We have a responsibility

to preserve the historical significance of this area for the country," says Martinez. "My hope is to give outsiders a glimpse of our culture that they don't normally have access to, and to give local Louisianans another reason to validate and celebrate our culture."

View the paintings and photographs in this exhibit, check its traveling schedule and listen to recorded interviews at <http://lacoast.gov/new/GetInvolved/OralHistory.aspx>

Martinez emphasizes the importance of coastal restoration. "Rebuilding barrier islands prevents a likely domino effect of land loss on the mainland," says Martinez. "Restoration projects protect the Mississippi River and the international trade, so vital to the nation's economy, that uses the port of New Orleans. Wetlands protect the city from storm surges, and everything related to the seafood industry that feeds so much of America depends on our healthy wetlands."

Because of her childhood memories of swimming and camping at Scofield Island, CWPPRA projects rebuilding barrier islands and shorelines, such as Pass Chaland to Grand Bayou Pass Barrier Shoreline Restoration (BA-35) Barataria Barrier Island Complex Project: Pelican Island and Pass La Mer to Chaland Pass Restoration (BA-38) mean the most to her. Marsh created by the West Bay Sediment Delivery project (MR-03) also excites her, as does the Bayou Dupont (BA-39) project. "The progress there is amazing," Martinez says. "The plants

came back on their own in just a matter of months."

"If restoration is successful..."

Like other long-term residents of coastal Louisiana, the Croatian American community watches and worries as the land where their forefathers settled and flourished disappears forever. "If the Gulf takes the land, it takes the oyster industry as well," Oustalet says. "If restoration is successful, maybe that won't happen."

As an oysterman out on the water frequently over nearly five decades, Cvitanovich sees proposed diversions only as a partial fix at best. "It's a question of scale," Cvitanovich says. "The river doesn't carry the land-building sediment it used to; silt is trapped behind upriver dams or diverted down the Atchafalaya. We need some freshwater influx, but it's more important to build up barrier islands to retain the interior estuary system. Without that protection, salt water will continue to infiltrate and kill the marshes."

"Louisiana's coast is a working coast," says Leopold,

"with different groups competing for the same natural resources. That makes it tough, because some restoration efforts may affect people's ability to pursue traditional livelihoods. Change is difficult, but the question is, how do we adapt so that we don't lose all of our coastal environment? We have to find the way that works best for everybody, or there won't be anything left. If we want to pass along what we have to our children and our children's children, we have to treat it and respect it as a treasure in all the ways that we use it."

"Marsh loss has changed the game for everyone," Martinez says. "CWPPRA has been a great experiment in coastal restoration – and we get to participate. CWPPRA is a bottom-up process that from the very beginning invites public involvement to propose and discuss projects. Every CWPPRA meeting is open to public participation. And we see the results. We see what is working. No one knows what the end would be if we did nothing." **WM**

WATERMARKS INTERVIEW WITH DON DAVIS

Don Davis is professor emeritus and director of oral histories, Louisiana Sea Grant program, and author of *Washed Away? The Invisible Peoples of Louisiana's Wetlands*. The book traces the history, culture and economic influences of the many diverse ethnicities who settled in coastal Louisiana. Davis refers to these people as marsh dwellers.



WATERMARKS: In your book you detail the history and character of the peoples who settled in Louisiana's coastal marshes. What's the attitude of present-day marsh dwellers toward coastal restoration?

DAVIS: The people of coastal Louisiana are living in an emergency situation. Environmental change is literally stealing their land and destroying their livelihoods. They want wetlands built as fast as possible. In general they are saying, "Our back yards are disappearing. When are we going to move dirt?"

People realize efforts to restore the coast are being made, but they see all these impediments – benefit-to-cost ratio studies, discussions, terminology, new legal issues. They want to know, when do we move forward? The longer we wait, the more difficult their situation becomes.

WATERMARKS: How are marsh dwellers dealing with this ongoing emergency?

DAVIS: Coastal people are not strangers to disaster. Throughout the decades floods and hurricanes have wiped out their homes, forcing them to

choose between rebuilding and relocating. For most, it's not a complicated decision – you go back to where you are comfortable, to where you can make a living. They are rational people making rational decisions. They know they are vulnerable, but they are resilient. To my mind their resiliency makes them absolutely unique in 21st century America. They may not win the ongoing battle against nature, but they won't give up.

WATERMARKS: What's in their future?

DAVIS: If the land washes away, marsh dwellers will have to build floating communities, or relocate. They are not naïve; they may come to the reality that, eventually, they might have to move. But they want to do it on their own terms, when they are ready – not as a result of a mandated retreat. They want to make this pivotal decision for themselves.

There are other environments in which people are at risk, but no one is telling them to move. No one says to Los Angeles residents after an earthquake, "You have to get out," or to Oakland residents after a fire, "Leave, go find some other place to live." But people not even living in Louisiana are telling coastal



Lane Lefort

Along with the very land upon which Louisiana's rich history was enacted, evidence of the peoples who lived in the coastal region is succumbing to engulfing waters. Established in 1905 during a yellow fever epidemic, the Leeville Cemetery has suffered decades of damaging hurricanes. Now sinking land and rising sea levels increase the threats to its survival.

dwellers, who have built their homes and buried their ancestors and still make their living in the marsh, that they should move. Restoration policies are just simply wrong if they are made by people who don't live in the marsh and don't understand the human element in the wetland ecosystem.

WATERMARKS: Why do you think inhabitants of the wetlands have such a small voice in restoration planning?

DAVIS: Historically, the marsh was perceived as worthless — a wasteland. It was isolated, a place into which someone could disappear and no one would go looking for him. Hence, to the outside world, marsh dwellers were largely invisible.

The marsh dwellers understood the economic value of the marsh, and they understood they had to be good stewards of the landscape. If they dug a canal to gain access to fishing or hunting grounds, they built a dam to prevent saltwater intrusion. They were very aware of the fragility of their resources. They used the wetlands but didn't convert them into something of commercial value.

There is a tendency to envision coastal restoration as a scientific and engineering problem, not as a social one. Scientists understand a lot of technical things about the wetland environment, but not about the people who live in it. Nobody's asking the marsh dwellers — the real experts — about their own back yard. In my opinion, academic decisions made by people who don't know the landscape at the ground level will never work.



Readily available in the coastal environment, palmetto was used to roof this early 20th century Native American home. For centuries, marsh dwellers have harvested materials native to the wetlands to construct buildings able to withstand Louisiana's climate. Traditionally resourceful and adaptable to changing conditions, coastal residents today face the challenge of developing innovative solutions for living in a vanishing landscape.

Photo provided by Dr. Don Davis of LA Sea Grant. Original from the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. John R Swanton Collection

Hurricanes in 2005, 2008 and 2012 refocused attention on the issue of vulnerability. A number of non-governmental and other organizations began conducting conferences and workshops on natural hazards, on building codes and disaster preparedness. This is a beginning, but is it enough? When will families who have lived in this region for more than seven generations be asked to take an active role in finding affordable and workable solutions?

WATERMARKS: What is it that marsh dwellers have to offer professionals working on coastal restoration?

DAVIS: These people are engaged in making a living in this environment and they know it better than anyone else. Policy-makers need to realize the locals have invaluable knowledge that can't be ignored.

Marsh dwellers may have solutions that don't fit preconceived ideas about restoring the coast, but that doesn't mean they are wrong — it means that decision-makers may have to rethink the ways we go about restoration.

Each community has its own set of objectives, but there are some commonalities: each requires that solutions to land loss be affordable and have the capacity to proceed quickly. And brutal honesty must be the glue binding all approaches.

Marsh dwellers are living with environmental changes not of their own making — subsidence, sea-level rise, the channelization of the Mississippi River and the accelerated erosion of the wetlands. The people affected by these processes are not the problem. They are part of the solution. **WM**

WATERMARKS

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