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LAST STAND IN THE BAYOU

Horrified by the harvesting of Louisiana's cypress trees for mulch, Dean Wilson took on an industry

In his motorboat, Dean Wilson skims the Atchafalaya swamp in south Louisiana, mossy arms of cypresses arrayed elegantly above. "Why would anyone destroy this," he asks, looking up to trees that have stood since before the country's founding, "just to mulch their garden?"

For 15 years this fishing guide and cofounder of the nonprofit Save our Cypress has patrolled wetlands, documenting the clear-cutting of trees that not only give the area its distinctive character but also protect its coastline from hurricanes. But where Wilson, 46, sees beauty, loggers see profit: Cypress mulch, a by-product of lum-

ber production, retails for \$2 per 20-lb. bag and is more popular than pine.

That might be different, Wilson thought, if only people selling mulch could see the trees as he does. So last year he talked executives from Walmart into joining him on a tour. "It was incredible," company spokeswoman Tara Raddohl says of their trip through the habitat of white egrets, bald eagles and alligators. It made an impression: In January the chain stopped buying Louisiana mulch. (Execs from Lowe's have taken a tour; Home Depot may be next.) With six mills closed this year, the market, says Louisiana Forestry Association executive director Buck

Vandersteen, "has taken a hit." Mill owner Frank Vallot says he may have to lay off 60 workers next month. "I want to know if Dean Wilson is going to feed those 60 people," says Vallot.

Wilson, a twice-divorced father of three, feels their plight but says if logging continues "the trees will be gone in 10 years, so there won't be any jobs." Moved by the sight of ghostly clusters of decimated tree stumps, he vows to keep fighting. "These trees are one of America's wonders," he says. "Somebody's got to stand up for them."

By Johnny Dodd. Lori Rozsa in Bayou Sorrel, La.

Know a hero? Send suggestions to HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN SMITH