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Atchafalaya Basin supporters fighting to preserve ecosystem, promote ecotourism

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Dean Wilson dreamed of living off the land in the Amazon, outside the conveniences and hassles of modern life.

As a young man, Wilson knew he'd need some practice before living in the world's largest tropical rain forest. He'd only read of the Atchafalaya Basin then, as the largest swamp in North America was half a world from his home.

He left the states only a year after his birth to live in Spain, his mother's homeland, but he packed his bags and came to Louisiana shortly before his 21st birthday without fully knowing what he would have to endure in the southern swamps.

"I wanted to come here to get used to the heat and the mosquitoes," Wilson said.

But Wilson wouldn't ever make it to the Amazon. Instead, the basin's beauty kept him here. He worked as a commercial fisherman for 16 years, and he raised three children in the swamps.

A photograph of a young Wilson shows him standing nearly knee deep in swampy water while holding a bow and arrow. He hunted rabbits and trapped crawfish while living his ideal of a simple life and surviving off the land.

His dream came to fruition here in Louisiana instead of in the jungles of South America.

"The only way we see God is through his creations, and the Atchafalaya

Basin is one of the most beautiful places of God," Wilson said. "My kids cherish those memories."

Today, Wilson is one of the basin's strongest supporters. He takes tourists and curious locals on tours, and he founded the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper in 2004. The non-profit organization, which aims to protect and restore the basin's ecosystems, has grown from about only 100 members three years ago to nearly 500 today.

For many Louisianans, the Atchafalaya Basin isn't much more than a swamp with a nearly 20-mile bridge on the interstate between Lafayette and Baton Rouge.

For people who haven't lived in Louisiana, the Atchafalaya Basin is a tongue twister that's nearly impossible to pronounce -- the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area's website suggests thinking of a sneeze, "uh-CHA-fuh-lie-uh."

But for Wilson and many other outdoorsmen, Acadians and Cajuns, the basin is the lifeblood not only for this region and state but also for an entire hemisphere. The basin's environmental impact extends far beyond Louisiana's borders, collecting water from as far north as Canada and attracting migratory birds from South America.

For those people, the basin isn't just a place to live, work and relax. The Atchafalaya Basin also represents a way of life, an ode to generations past and a cornerstone of the culture to be passed on to their children.

"There is something about being out there in the swamp, especially when you're alone, that seems to suck the poisons of society from you," said Greg Guirard, a former instructor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette who is now a photographer and author. "There's a healing power in the basin."

The Atchafalaya Basin has been thrust into the national spotlight, with TV shows such as History Channel's "Swamp People" attracting tourists from across the country. Experts like Wilson and Guirard believe the ancient ecosystem is at a pivotal moment and hope to capitalize on the national attention to secure more awareness and funding to keep the basin healthy for future generations.

"This is a critical time in history, since the Atchafalaya Basin is under siege in a way that it has not been since the levees were built, the Atchafalaya River was channelized and the old growth cypress and tupelo forests were clear cut," Wilson wrote in the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper's 2011 annual report, titled "Swamp Wars: The Fight for the Atchafalaya Basin." "The years 2012 and 2013 will be crucial to the future of the Atchafalaya Basin's swamps."

Off the grid

Marcus de la Houssaye is the self-proclaimed "King of the Swamp."

He began fishing in the Atchafalaya Basin as a child on expeditions with his father. After 25 years of making those trips, de la Houssaye, who was born in New Iberia, realized he didn't want to leave the swamps to keep returning home.

So in 1986, he built a houseboat and began living off the grid -- without electricity, plumbing or a telephone -- in the Atchafalaya Basin for nearly a decade. He'd anchor his home in the shade during summer, when he trapped crabs for food. In the winter, he'd move the boat to the sun and run trotlines to catch his meals.

"When I lived on my houseboat in the Atchafalaya, I began to wonder how we got so disconnected from nature. Living with the frogs, birds and gators give me a unique perspective," de la Houssaye said during a recent swamp tour on Lake Martin. "A lot of people thought I was not just off the grid but that I was off my rocker."

Though Lake Martin isn't technically connected to of the Atchafalaya Basin, it does lie within the geographic impression of the basin. And the familiar landscapes and environment remind de la Houssaye of his former home and give him a place to take out-of-towners when trying to bring in cash.

He takes the tourists through clusters of cypress trees on his boat, named "Queen Tanya" after a former girlfriend from Bossier City he once thought would share his swampy throne. He points to plants, birds and alligators while telling Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes and ranting against politicians and corporations he believes have damaged the basin or are part of a large-scale conspiracy.

One of his dogs, a Catahoula with light blue eyes he calls "Jessie the alligator dog," rides along for the tours, either calmly napping on Queen Tanya's bow or barking fiercely to guard the vessel when de la Houssaye says "gator."

De la Houssaye left the houseboat in 1995 and moved to Carencro to raise his daughter, who recently graduated from high school. He envisions returning to the basin and building a smaller houseboat, one he can pull with a trailer attached to his truck when he's forced to flee from hurricanes.

"The measure of this man is 'How happy am I? We have the best of both worlds today," de la Houssaye said. "We live in a technologically advanced world five days per week, and then on Fridays we go to the basin. There was a time when a lot of people lived off the land. But today, the basin is mostly a recreational place."

The primitive lifestyle both de la Houssaye and Wilson lived is one very few people experience today. De la Houssaye claims to have been the "last permanent resident of the Atchafalaya Basin" to live without the conveniences of modern life.

Though some people do still live in the basin, like those who call Boutte La Rose home, those residents typically live in houses comparable to ones in developed neighborhoods.

"It's largely uninhabited now," said Thomas Doyle, a researcher at the National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette who has worked in the basin since the '90s. "People lived there and made their early beginnings there, mostly through the logging of cypress. Some communities are no longer there just because the basin only has a marginal capacity to sustain a development that isn't at risk for recurring floods."

The last people Guirard recalls living off the land in the basin were Harold and Myrtle Bigler, who lived without electricity for many years until Harold died in 1990 and Myrtle in 1995.

"Nobody wants to live that way anymore," said Guirard, who lives between Henderson and Catahoula across the levee from the basin. He also owns two houseboats and often spends extended stays inside the levees.

"The Atchafalaya Basin is not environmentally healthy in the way it used to be 20, 30 or 40 years ago," he said. "It was easy for a man who was willing to work hard to make a living crawfishing, catfishing and so forth. Now, you can work as hard as you want, and you still barely scrape by as a crawfisherman. The productivity in the basin is way down, and that's primarily due to the water quality."

Harnessing nature

The Atchafalaya Basin today is generally considered the floodplain areas inside the eastern and western levees. The basin once stretched beyond where the levees stand today, creating wetlands with sediments from the Atchafalaya and Mississippi Rivers.

The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area, established in 2006, stretches across 14 Louisiana parishes and is "among the most culturally rich and ecologically varied regions in the United States, home to the widely recognized Cajun culture as well as a diverse population of European, African, Caribbean and Native-American descent," according to the heritage area's website.

In concept, a heritage area is created from "partnerships where residents, businesses, local governments, and state and federal agencies collaborate to create more livable and economically sustainable regions."

More than half of the Atchafalaya Basin is privately owned, and those landowners have to work with government regulators and environmental groups, such as Basinkeeper, to ensure the basin's longevity.

The Old River Control Structure, built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers near Simmesport in the early '60s, controls the amount of water flowing from the Mississippi River into the Atchafalaya River and into the basin.

Garret Graves, chair of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, which is under the governor's office, said the state is currently studying the Corps' 70-30 percent split of water flow between the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers, respectively, to determine if that ratio could be adjusted to more greatly benefit the basin.

Graves said the government spends about \$500,000 annually to monitor various aspects of the basin, such as the water flow at the Old River Control Structure. Millions, he said, are spent on handfuls of projects to keep the basin and Louisiana's ample other wetlands healthy.

Competing interests between the government, landowners, corporations, environmentalists and others, however, often makes agreeing on how to preserve the basin a difficult task.

"I don't want to stand here and pretend like the federal government shouldn't have a role in what we're doing, but there are a lot of frustrations with the Corps of Engineers and their bureaucracy," Graves said.

In early May, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican, asked the Corps to divert more of the Mississippi River's water into the Atchafalaya River, saying "below-normal water levels in the Atchafalaya Basin have resulted in adverse effects on water quality and crawfish harvests." The Corps, however, ultimately declined to adjust the water flow.

In 2011, the risk of flooding forced officials to open the Morganza Spillway, which sent even more water into the Atchafalaya Basin. Residents in Boutte La Rose evacuated then, but drought conditions allowed the land to absorb the water and alleviate anticipated flood damage. This year, though, the basin's water level is low.

"Drying up the basin on an occasional basis isn't necessarily a bad thing across the board," Graves said. "It can help the water quality and benefit some species like a cypress tree, but crawfish may suffer."

The water-flow split, however, also comes with sending 65 percent of the river's sediments into the Atchafalaya, per Corps policy, according to Wilson.

That heavy sediment flow has created new lands within the basin, and Wilson identifies the unnatural deposit of sediments as one of three major threats to the basin in his 2011 Basinkeeper annual report.

"The Corps has also realigned and straightened Grand River to maximize sediment loads into the Eastern Atchafalaya Basin in order to redistribute sediments into deep swamps to create uplands for major land owners," Wilson wrote in the Basinkeeper report.

Graves, on the other hand, believes building up that land can provide an example of how to slow Louisiana's coastal loss.

"Most of the rivers in our state have been leveed in a manner that is constraining," Graves said. "The Atchafalaya Basin was treated fundamentally differently -- it was given room. Louisiana is literally made up of the sediments from all the states and the Canadian providences. What we're seeing in the basin shows we can rebuild the land we've lost and protect Louisiana."

Doyle and a team of other researchers at the National Wetlands Research Center, like Hardin Waddle, who monitors amphibians in the basin, use the ecosystem for an array of studies, including bigger-pictures projects to help understand how Louisiana's coast is disappearing.

Doyle said he and other researchers think about the basin in two ways.

"The easiest way to talk about the basin," he said, "is talking about what's above the water line and what's below the water line."

Secondly, he thinks of the basin in thirds, with each part having different functions. The northern third, Doyle said, is a developed system of levees and controls amid a dry bottomland hardwood forest. Doyle said the basin's middle third is best for crawfishing and other aquatic harvesting, like catching fish, turtles and alligators, and includes the Boutte La Rose area.

The lowest third of the basin stays flooded and is home to the cypress trees many people associate with the area, Doyle said.

"Because the Atchafalaya Basin is in our backyard, it's like an experimental watershed," Doyle said.

Saving the cypress

Wilson challenges the status quo, pressing government regulators to more carefully control how landowners use property in the basin. When officials don't listen, he brings the battle to court.

Those battles primarily center on two of the three major threats to the basin that Wilson identifies in the 2011 Basinkeeper annual report -- unsustainable cypress logging and illegal development of wetlands, including pipelines and canals.

"Imagine that we all get together and try to get a loan and the loan gets denied, then the next day, we go and rob the bank," Wilson wrote in the report. "When we get caught, instead of putting us in jail, they tell us to keep the money in our pockets. They tell us not to worry; we just have to apply for an after-the-fact loan, and since we already have the money, there will be no interest on the loan. This is exactly how our agencies treat some people or companies that illegally dam bayous or destroy hundreds of acres of wetlands."

Logging changed the basin's face once before, and Wilson wants to make sure the trees that survived an aggressive lumber industry can remain for future generations to enjoy.

"You would think the state of Louisiana would do its best to protect these wetlands, but the opposite has happened," Wilson said. "We have very little enforcement, so people started logging illegally in 2000. The agencies that are supposed to protect the people aren't protecting us any longer. Right now, we're going backwards, and it's getting worse and worse."

Wilson said the basin's forests provide \$6.6 billion in economic output annually from ecotourism and other factors, but cutting the cypress trees came only in one-time payments worth a total of about \$3.3 billion.

"We used to have anywhere between 6 and 8 million acres of cypress swamps in the year 1700," Wilson said. "By 1848, we had 2.3 million acres, and today, we have only 840,000 of those acres that came back with cypress. If you cut them down today, they will never come back again."

Wilson has tracked loggers harvesting cypress trees to sell as mulch by following trucks, taking pictures through fences around processing facilities and finding pilots to fly him over the sites for a closer look.

"Everybody just does what they want," Wilson said. "These people are millionaires making pennies. It's pitiful."

Wilson is also chair of the Sierra Club's Atchafalaya Basin Committee and is the adviser on cypress forests and Atchafalaya Basin issues for the Louisiana Environmental Action Network.

According to Wilson, the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper and the related Save Our Cypress Coalition have successfully stopped most logging in Louisiana.

Increased

exposure

For documentary filmmaker Eric Breaux, the Atchafalaya Basin is a setting and a stage.

Breaux, who grew up in Mermentau and now lives in Lafayette, has documented the lifestyle of his friend, 26-year-old Jude Mequet, who lives in Henderson and owns Cypress Cove Landing.

Like de la Houssaye, Mequet also lived on a houseboat in the basin. His father gave him a houseboat after graduating from high school, and Mequet began living on the houseboat in 2004 as soon as he returned from his senior trip. He lived on that boat until 2008.

"Everybody needs to come enjoy the basin," Mequet said. "From the big, white herons to the alligators, it's the prettiest thing you'll ever see."

Breaux and Mequet sell DVDs online and hawk the documentaries on Facebook. The pair's first film, "Hunting the Atchafalaya" shows how to catch crawfish, hunt deer, catch frogs and shoot turkeys.

"I wanted to show off how spectacular that part of the United States is, and I wanted to show the types of animals that live out there," Breaux said. "From season to season, it's always beautiful, but a lot of people just see it from the interstate and never get the chance to go down, cross the levee and take a boat ride. It's much more spectacular up close."

Their second film, "Atchafalaya Tails," is "strictly alligators," and the pair plans to make more documentaries in the near future.

"Gator hunting is one of the most popular things going on right now, and I wanted to show my own style and how

it's different from what they show on TV," Mequet said. "I'm trying to promote Cajun bad ass, not Cajun dumb ass."

For Wilson, protecting the environment he knows and loves is an uphill battle, but he's making gains. The more people who join the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper organization, he said, the easier it is for him to secure grant money and have clout with politicians.

In his 2011 annual report, Wilson said the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper lost \$90,000 in funding, forcing it to give up its staff attorney, after a major charitable foundation backed by wealthy corporations pledged the money and then demanded he drop litigation involving the basin and suspend the Save Our Cypress Campaign -- two demands he flatly refused.

"If you want to help protect the basin," Wilson said, "Then you should first join the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper."

"Our ancestors made a terrible mistake in not demanding that some of the Atchafalaya Basin cypress not get cut down, and I don't want to see that mistake happen again," he said.

Protecting the basin

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Pull quote: "The years 2012 and 2013 will be crucial to the future of the Atchafalaya Basin's swamps." Dean Wilson, Atchafalaya Basinkeeper, in his 2011 annual report, "Swamp Wars: The Fight for the Atchafalaya Basin"

Breakout box:

What can you do to help the basin?

""Don't buy cypress mulch for landscaping.

""Talk with friends and family about the basin's importance.

""Spend time in the basin hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, kayaking, canoeing or partaking in other outdoor activities.

""Invite the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper to give a presentation for your civic or school group.

""Join the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper organization and visit the group's website at Basinkeeper.org.

Source: "Swamp Wars: The Fight for the Atchafalaya Basin," the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper's 2011 annual report.

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