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Keeping the Basin: Dean Wilson strives to protect the Atchafalaya's natural wonder

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BAYOU SORREL - With the ease one would expect of a lifelong resident, Dean Wilson piloted his small motorboat deep into the Atchafalaya Basin, past cypress stumps and through narrow cuts shrouded by hanging limbs and vines.

The Atchafalaya Basin has become home to Wilson. It's where he fishes commercially, provides boat tours and is raising his children. But Wilson, 47, is not a native of Louisiana and didn't even plan on living here.

Raised in his mother's native Spain, Wilson visited the Atchafalaya Basin on his way to the Amazon. He spent four months in the swamps with a bow and spear, getting used to the heat and mosquitoes in preparation for a primitive life studying natives in the Amazon rainforest.

He never made it there.

"I fell in love with the swamps," he said. "This is one of the wonders of America right here in our backyard."

Blue herons. Black crown night herons. Snowy egrets. Great egrets. Cattle egrets. Green herons. Mississippi kites. Small tailed kites. Peregrine falcons. Hummingbirds. Owls.

These are some of the 200 species of birds that call the Atchafalaya Basin home or rely on it for food, water and rest during their migration to and from the Yucatan Peninsula, Wilson said. The Basin is part of the Mississippi Flyway.

Only the tropics are home to more bird species than the Basin. More than 100 species of fish and shellfish, along with mammals like nutria and otters, and reptiles, including snakes, lizards and alligators, all call the Atchafalaya Basin home.

"Some say it's up to five times more productive than the Florida Everglades and Okefenokee Swamp," Wilson said.

One hundred years ago, huge moss-draped cypress trees - relatives to the Sequoias and Redwoods - created a cathedral-like atmosphere here. Trees towering 150 to 200 feet tall, some 12 feet in diameter, thousands of years old grew in these waters.

By the time Wilson arrived, most of those were gone, leveled by the logging industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Cypress trees in the Basin today are only about 100 years old, he said.

Wilson calls this the River of Trees, a take on the Everglades' nickname, River of Grass. The trees are essential to the wildlife living here, providing shelter in their hollows, crooks and crevices to critters like owls and wood ducks, spiders and warblers.

"If you cut the trees down, you're really destroying home for all the wildlife in the swamp," he said.

A certain mixture of water and dry land is needed for the cypress trees to thrive in the Atchafalaya Basin. They need a certain amount of water to grow and a certain amount of dry time for their seeds to germinate, Wilson said. Too little water for too long and hardwood trees such as the invasive Chinese tallow crowd out the cypress trees. Too much water for too long and the swamp converts to open water, he said.

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As he embraced his new life in the Basin, Wilson learned about the many challenges it faces: lack of fresh water flow due to control structures and canal spoil banks, disputes over access between landowners and fishermen, disputes over ownership of land that floods, environmental and ecological impacts of natural gas and oil exploration and production.

He was surprised to find that few in Louisiana were fighting to preserve this most diverse and productive wetland in North America.

"Nobody else was doing anything. We were about to lose the entire Basin," Wilson said.

In the early 2000s, the Basin underwent another onslaught of logging. This time the cypress, tupelo and tallow trees were harvested only to be chopped up into tiny pieces, bagged and sold as mulch for gardens.

Wilson decided to do something to try to save the Basin. Around 2003, he founded the Basinkeeper program, part of an international grassroots advocacy group called the Waterkeeper Alliance.

His job as Basinkeeper is to protect the watershed through education, research and enforcement of environmental laws.

"My job really is to make sure the swamps in the Atchafalaya Basin will be here for our kids and grandkids," Wilson said. "I work for you."

But Wilson said the Basin will never be saved until or unless all of it is made public. And everyone in the United

States and North America should care, he said.

"It's critical to the continent to protect the Atchafalaya Basin," Wilson added.

The Choctaw called it Long River.

Basinkeeper Dean Wilson calls it River of Trees.

But for the many who live along this 140-mile length of winding waterway and the nearly 1 million acres of swamps, forests and marshes surrounding it, it's our playground, our fishing hole, our source of income, our home.

Our Atchafalaya.

This is the latest installment in an occasional series exploring the expansive, rich basin created by the Atchafalaya River and the people who live and work here.

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