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Louisiana's Mulch Madness

Cypress forests are the state's best defense against hurricanes. So why are loggers clear-cutting the last trees?

—By **Michael Behar** | March/April 2008 Issue

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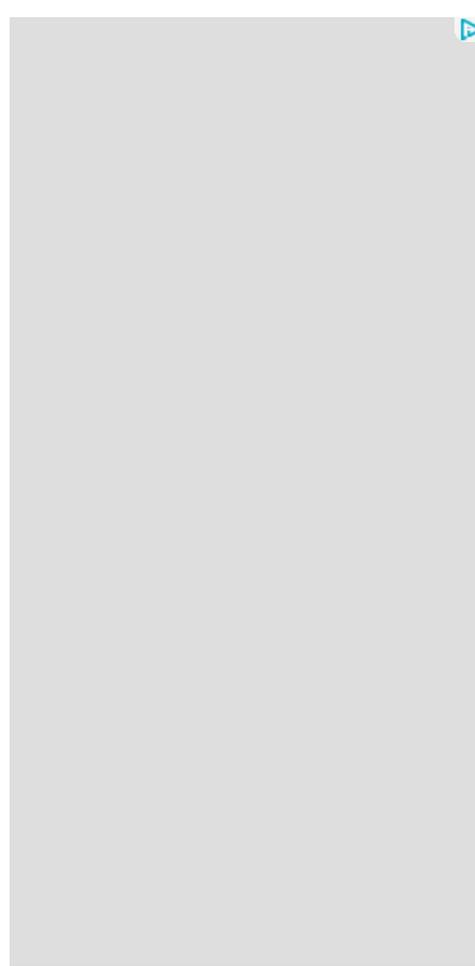
Photo: Christopher Lamarca

DEAN WILSON SLAMS forward the throttle on his 18-foot aluminum bateau—a flat-bottom skiff that he welded together himself—and catapults us downriver. It's April and I'm in the Atchafalaya Basin, the nation's largest swamp—1.4 million acres (roughly 10 times the size of Chicago) wedged between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico in southern Louisiana.

Dressed in full camo and knee-high rubber boots, Wilson, 45, skims through a bayou only a couple of feet deep, and nearly pitches me overboard when he swerves left to avoid a hapless butterfly that's fluttered into our path. A minute later he yells "Duck!" then cranks the wheel. We slide to the right, doing a NASCAR-style drift turn into a smaller canal. Sharp reeds and spiky underbrush scrape the hull; it sounds like a thousand swamp trolls clawing at our boat. Fearing decapitation, I wedge my head between my knees as overhanging branches graze my back.

Suddenly, Wilson kills the engine. The air is heavy and acrid, infused with the smell of organic decay. We drift silently into a cove ringed with cypress trees. Left to their own devices, these sturdy, 100-foot-tall giants live

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an average of 500 years but have been known to celebrate birthdays in the thousands. They reign over all life in the Atchafalaya, a stunningly diverse wetland that is home to at least 300 bird species. In addition, half of all migratory birds in North America—up to 2 million a day—use the Atchafalaya to nest, mate, or rest. The critter count also includes bobcats, foxes, alligators, minks, armadillos, coyotes, and otters, as well as endangered peregrine falcons, Louisiana black bears, and Florida panthers.

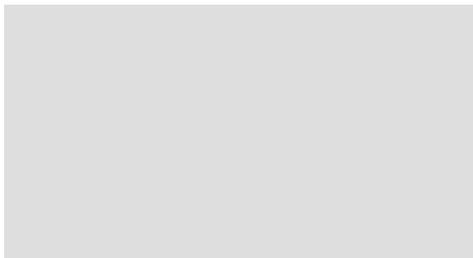
Since the mid-1980s, Wilson has been an unlikely addition to this menagerie. Born on a U.S. Air Force base in Torrejón, Spain, to a GI father and Spanish mother who soon divorced, he lived there until the age of 20, when he decided to volunteer with an environmental group dedicated to saving the Amazon. Before heading to Brazil, Wilson reckoned he should do a trial run somewhere a bit less hostile. "I needed to get used to the heat and mosquitoes." He chose the Atchafalaya.

When he landed in the United States in 1983, Wilson couldn't speak a word of English. His first stop was Belleville, Illinois, where his father lived. After a short stint working as a busboy for IHOP, he borrowed money to buy a red VW bus that he named "Churrumbel" after a dinosaur in a Spanish comic book and headed for southern Louisiana. He bought a hammock, tent, bow and arrows, rubber boots, and a spear, then found a plot of dry land in the swamp to set up camp. Aside from a few fishing trips, he had no wilderness experience. "I stayed for four months by myself," says Wilson. He dined on a smorgasbord of squirrels, frogs, crawfish, and whatever else he could catch. "I ate only what I hunted. Sometimes I had too much to eat; sometimes I didn't have enough."

The Amazon would have to wait. "I fell in love with the swamp and never left," he says. He eked out a living as a commercial fisherman. By 1987, he'd leased a half-acre plot in Bayou Sorrel for \$150 a year, where he built a home propped three feet off the ground on cinder blocks—floodwaters lap at his doorstep at least once a year—and where he still lives with two dogs, two parrots, three horses, a pet snake, and a terrarium full of frogs, skinks, anoles, and newts.

Spending day after day in the swamp, Wilson began to notice a sudden surge in cypress logging about eight years ago. The practice devastates the Atchafalaya because cypress are the godfathers of the swamp, providing a fertile, protective sanctuary for wildlife. Without them, invasive plants quickly overrun indigenous species and strangle the ecosystem. "I realized that nobody was doing anything to protect the Atchafalaya," he says. "I got fed up with it and started to do swamp tours to raise awareness." One group that hired his Last Wilderness Tours told him about the Waterkeeper Alliance, Robert Kennedy Jr.'s grassroots nonprofit aimed at preserving waterways and wetlands. He sent in a proposal and in 2004 became the organization's Atchafalaya Basinkeeper. "He is the eyes and ears of the Atchafalaya," says Kennedy. "He's also the voice and fist."

Like a Great Wall rimming the coast, cypress forests in the Atchafalaya and elsewhere in Louisiana are the single best defense against hurricanes—magnitudes stronger, more enduring, and cheaper than any concrete or



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So much for the convention's "I built that" punchline.

Swamp Rats

Who abets the clearcutting of the last cypress stands?

- **Department of Natural Resources**
Under the 2005 Coastal Impact Assistance

earthen levee. Their extensive root system spreads several hundred feet, weaving a tight lattice that serves as an anchor against high winds and storm surges. Hassan Mashriqui, a Louisiana State University professor of coastal engineering who creates computer simulations of hurricanes, told me that a stand of cypress just a football field in width can slash a town-leveling, 20-foot-high storm surge by 90 percent.

Which makes it all the more staggering that in recent years an entire industry intent on logging cypress has lawfully sprung up. Some of the timber winds up as boards for home construction or furniture, but most trees are ground into garden mulch. That's right: The last natural stronghold that could stop hurricanes from obliterating southern Louisiana is being pulverized into chips to adorn the very homes that the cypress would save from annihilation. According to the Louisiana Forestry Association, loggers are razing up to 20,000 acres of cypress every year. If the carnage continues apace, Louisiana's strongest barrier between it and an angry sea will be gone in fewer than two decades.

It's sick, it's twisted, it's totally insane, and that's why today Wilson regularly patrols rivers, lakes, and bayous in search of logging operations. He takes careful notes, snaps photos, and forwards the data to the local media, conservation groups, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Army Corps of Engineers, and Waterkeeper's headquarters in New York.

His efforts have infuriated loggers, mill operators, and timber-beholden politicians who say they provide desperately needed jobs to poor counties. Wilson has been threatened, warned to watch his back. A few days before my visit, he discovered Luna, his sprightly seven-year-old Samoyed-German shepherd mix, in a crumpled heap at the end of his gravel driveway.

Program, the state DNR was given \$18.8 million to (mostly) buy cypress forests from private owners. To do so, the DNR was supposed to survey the swamps and designate areas most at risk. Three years later, it hasn't classified any land, or spent any of the money.

- Department of Agriculture and Forestry** The state agency has a vested interest in preserving the \$4.5 billion logging industry—Louisiana's second largest. Under recently retired Commissioner Bob Odom (listen to his personal jingle at BobOdom.com), the LDAF encouraged landowners to harvest their timber.
- Louisiana Forestry Association** A private lobbying group whose 4,000 members include landowners, foresters, wood suppliers, and loggers, the LFA insists that most cypress will grow back when logged. The head of the LFA, Buck Vandersteen, has been touring the country soliciting other pro-logging groups to pressure Wal-Mart to rescind its ban on Louisiana cypress mulch.
- Senator David Vitter** Before Katrina, Louisiana's Republican senator attempted to insert language into a \$2 billion water bill to prevent the Army Corps from enforcing already weak logging regulations in any but "navigable" waters.
- Former Representative Billy Tauzin** Although best known for his near-instantaneous transition from politician to Big Pharma lobbyist, Tauzin also used his position on the Energy and Commerce Committee to pressure the Army Corps to deregulate cypress logging.
- Louisiana's Congressional Delegation** The state's seven congressmen have taken a collective \$317,000 from the industry since 2000—1/3 of which has gone to Rep. Jim McCrery (R) alone. Along with senators Vitter (\$39,970) and Mary Landrieu (D; \$58,750), all of Louisiana's representatives signed a letter asking Wal-Mart to reconsider its cypress ban.

"Fuck You, Tyrants!": Ron Paul Supporters Rebel on Convention Floor
Paul supporters freak out after the GOP freezes out a group of pro-Paul delegates from Maine.

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She was dead—intentionally poisoned, his vet later confirmed.

"Who do you think did it?" I ask Wilson early one morning as we bounce along a dusty back road in his double-cab pickup.

"I have many enemies. Could be anyone," he says, then quickly changes the subject. "Do you like the Alan Parsons Project?" he asks, fumbling for a CD wedged between the front seats.

Twenty minutes later we pull into Wilson's town of Bayou Sorrel, a loose smattering of ranch homes, single wides, and bait-and-tackle shops along the intercoastal waterway about 30 miles south of Baton Rouge in the heart of the Atchafalaya. "People here don't like outsiders," Wilson warns me. He should know. He showed up 24 years ago and a few locals still scorn him as "that goddamn Mexican." "When I moved here they tried to run me out of town," he says in his often-indecipherable accent—a messy fusion of Spanish, Cajun, and Southern twangs. "They shot at me. They shot at my house. I got in fistfights."

Wilson gradually became friendly with most of his neighbors (except a cantankerous bunch who slept in derelict cars strewn around their yard). But today his activism is cultivating new foes. "It may sound dramatic," says Steve Fleischli, president of the Waterkeeper Alliance, "but Dean really does put himself at great physical risk to document what is happening down there."

MY BELLY IS FULL of bullfrogs. It's my second day with Wilson in the Atchafalaya and we're at a remote bush camp whose owner, Rick Carline, prepares his usual Cajun feast for guests: 45 pounds of fresh crawfish and a mountain of panfried bullfrogs that he captured with his bare hands. "Dueling Banjos" plays in my head, but after sampling one I feel chagrined at being such a snob. Frogs should be immediately stricken from the list of biblical plagues—the Egyptians didn't know what they were missing.

The next morning, a chilly, faintly salty veil of fog has spread over the swamp. We set off in Wilson's boat before sunrise through mixed stands of cypress and tupelo. After 20 minutes we reach a placid clearing. But it's hardly quiet; the birds are going ape-shit. Migration is in full swing and it's standing room only for latecomers looking to roost in the treetops. Within two minutes, Wilson names off more tropical migratory birds than I saw during an entire eight-day trek through the Costa Rican jungle. "That's a yellow-crowned night heron," he says, pointing to a barrel-chested bird probing a shallow bog with its beak. "They're from South America but they come here to mate. There are 200 species of neotropical birds breeding around us right now."

The cypress rise proudly from the mist and form a shady canopy. The sunlight filtering through their feathery leaves casts an electric green glow over the swamp. "Hurricane Andrew came right through here and you won't see a single cypress damaged by the storm," Wilson says. Like most cypress in the Atchafalaya, these are roughly 100 years old, mere teenagers; loggers hauled away the original old-growth trees during a 20-year timber rush that began at the turn of the last century.

Today's loggers maintain that the trees will grow back, just as they did before. "Mr. Basinkeeper says erroneous things because he's just a guide and doesn't have the background to understand," claims Janet Tompkins, who edits *Forests & People*, the quarterly of the Louisiana Forestry Association, a leading proponent of cypress logging. But wetland scientists, the Sierra Club, and the Audubon Society, as well as local representatives for the Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA, all concur with Wilson that the cypress don't stand a chance against logging.

The reason is that the swamp here sinks a few inches each year, a geological phenomenon called subsidence that occurs in all coastal wetlands. Historically, seasonal floods from the Mississippi River added silt to compensate for subsidence. But shipping canals and levees disrupt these regular deposits of fresh silt, and the swamp steadily collapses, allowing brackish water to flow inland from the Gulf of Mexico. The impact is deadly. "Cypress cannot tolerate high salinity levels and eventually they die," notes Wilson. The trees also require dry land to germinate—seedlings can't survive if submerged for more than 45 days. Most existing cypress in coastal Louisiana regenerated before saltwater incursion destroyed the natural conditions that once allowed a seedling to grow 30 feet in a decade. Cut down a cypress today and it's gone for good.

Of this there's little doubt. A few years ago, then-Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco commissioned 12 distinguished wetland experts to study the state's coastal cypress-tupelo forests. In April 2005, the Science Working Group, or SWG, published its findings. It valued timber in the swamps at \$3.3 billion, but it concluded that at least 80 percent of these forests will never return if logged. "In the spring you might see a blanket of little seedlings," says John Day, an ecology professor at Louisiana State University and SWG author. "But when the water comes up, it kills them."

To show me this firsthand, Wilson takes me to a recent clearcut—a 1,000-acre swath of devastation concealed in the core of the swamp, impossible to see from the road, or even our boat. We have to hike over a berm and through a tangle of brush to reach it. The land is dry, between floods, and Wilson wanders through the stumps looking despondent. We count 20 three-inch seedlings sprouting from the sticky mud. Wilson reaches down and strokes one with his hand, gently caressing it like a wounded animal. "The loggers tell you these trees will grow back, but they never do." Seasonal floodwaters will soon drown the seedlings, and in their place will come invasive species such as willow, which can germinate in deeper, saltier water but are lousy habitats for wildlife and topple easily during storms.

Next Page: After the 1920s, when loggers hacked down the last...



Michael Behar is a freelance writer. His work has appeared in Wired, National Geographic, and The Economist.



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Kate 03/23/2008 06:00 PM

Environmental hubris is America's fatal flaw. If this goes unchecked, our story will ultimately be a tragedy.

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Jeff - Save Our Cypress 03/23/2008 06:28 PM

Thanks for the amazing article. I hope everyone takes notice of this very real issue.

Please visit the Save Our Cypress Coalition website at <http://SaveOurCypress.org>

Jeffrey

Internet Organizer

Save Our Cypress Coalition

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Like Reply



dan favre 03/23/2008 09:35 PM

Micheal Behars article did a great job of telling the sad story of cypress mulch in Louisiana. Unfortunately, the impact of cypress mulch production extends well beyond Louisiana. Thankfully, the chorus of voices calling for the madness to end continues to grow.

With so many politically powerful players working actively to deprive the Gulf Coast of our best natural storm protection and wildlife habitat, its fortunate that there is an impressive team fighting for the cypress alongside Atchafalya Basinkeeper, Dean Wilson. The Save Our Cypress Campaign is supported by over 150 organizations from all over the country. From sign-wielding student activists to well-heeled garden club members, a diverse group of citizens is working to save our swamps from the mulch mills.

The Garden Club of America has taken a position against the use of cypress mulch. The Ogeechee Canoochee Riverkeeper has filed a citizen suit to protest illegal cypress logging in Georgia. In Florida, a state heavily impacted by cypress logging for mulch, a coalition of over 40 conservation groups has coalesced. The City of New Orleans and others have passed resolutions banning the use of cypress mulch on their property. The list goes on . . .

...

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Terry 03/23/2008 10:43 PM

Dean Wilson has had the courage to step up and defend the place he loves. One can make a lot of enemies when you stand between someone making money at the expense of many and the life support system god put in place for all of us. Dean is a hero who deserves support for all he is doing for all of us at his own expenses ...

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Egalitare 03/23/2008 10:57 PM

And in 15-20 years when the cypress are essentially gone and a storm comes thru that makes Katrina look like an ordinary Summer downpour, the perps will be long gone and we will be blaming people like Wilson for no yelling loud enough.

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sal 03/24/2008 12:30 AM

Thanks to Dean. Great article. I hope that the new governor of Louisiana can do something about this. But I dream.

Flag

Like Reply



Clarence D. Smart 03/24/2008 12:34 AM

The average human being is ignorant of what his/her actions have upon the environment. Anything to make a dollar...never mind the end result. It would seem that humans wouldn't "[deleted]-up" their environment just to make a quick buck and then whine when the results are not to their liking.

Flag

Like Reply



john 03/24/2008 06:13 PM

great article it would be great if evertone took heed in the cypress and other environmental issues in this country but in the mean time we should be taking pictures and preserving samples for our grandchildren....just in case

Flag

Like Reply



Edward Mugits 03/24/2008 07:42 PM

Great news, keep it up. As an advocate of sustainable practices this is near and dear. Water, trees and earth. Support us all who make these efforts, www.kellymoorepaint.org

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Like Reply



M. Gilmore 03/24/2008 07:49 PM

I am a native Louisianian, now living in Vermont. I am appalled at what is happening, and ashamed

that I was not previously aware of this. Not only will I never buy cypress mulch again, but I will tell everyone I know not to either. But this is not enough. Louisiana is a graft-ridden state and I don't see much hope for changing things.

Flag

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eugene 03/25/2008 05:02 AM

Hello, Humanity, 3-25-2008

Should you, could you or would you [pick one] consider that the clear cutting of the cypress barrier or forests anywhere is done in part because of [1]the greed of mankind, [2]selfish interest over community concerns and [3]the divided condition of humanity.

Just a thought to consider and not any accusation of "wrong-doing". Only the individual can see that personal choice and be the new direction for Humanity.

Enjoy the trip and lessons - see you later!

eugene

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fred switzman 03/25/2008 05:08 AM

the federal agencies that are doling out monies should withhold this largess unless the locals stop the abuse.

Flag

Like Reply



Jeff - Save Our Cypress 03/25/2008 08:58 PM

Thanks J.L.

It is always an uphill battle to educate consumers, even more so, employees at business that sell mulch. Please help us by telling EVERYONE you know to go to <http://SaveOurCypress.org>

We have resources on there to assist them in selecting mulch and taking action to stop the clear cutting.

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JL 03/25/2008 09:00 PM

Well, I am a gardener and I use mulch - no more. I will use horse manure compost as mulch instead. As a gardener I mean no offense to harm the environment or the people who suffer from it, in fact I care very much for it as do a lot of other gardeners.

Articles like this highlight many of the questions gardeners have that never get answered. I always asked where my mulch comes from, and I always get an obscure answers. So this year I was thinking of switching to horse manure (my friend works at a local stable) which would have many more benefits than wood mulch.

Articles like these need to spread the word, that is how real action begins because I know how many people who use mulch have no knowledge of where it came from and what the effects are to the local habitat.

Thank you.

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adamcrisis 03/30/2008 11:02 PM

great article, but once again something that makes me sad at the state of our world, and at the overall helplessness I often feel

Flag

Like Reply



harvey stern 03/31/2008 06:23 PM

Thanks to Mother Jones for highlighting the mulch threat to our cypress forests here in Louisiana. Although, as the article states, most of Louisiana's old growth has long ago been logged off, many patches of old growth cypress remain throughout the state. The Louisiana Purchase Cypress Legacy campaign has identified and landmarked many sites of Louisiana cypress stands that are centuries old--in some cases over 1000 years, according to core samples. Since cypress trees tend to hollow out after 300 years of age, many of the remaining old growth tree were already hollow when lumbering began two centuries ago, and so escaped the ax. The Louisiana Purchase Cypress Legacy campaign promotes conservation and stewardship of these remaining "great, great grandfathers" of Louisiana's forests--trees that were alive at the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Our website is www.LaPurchaseCypressLegacy.net

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Benny 04/02/2008 03:30 AM

I read this article in an airport in Boise, ID and was blown away. Great work!

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David G. Mills 04/04/2008 04:40 AM

Cypress are my favorite trees. I know far more about them than most people.

Yet I did not know that the cypress mulch I have been buying came from trees that were not used for their lumber. No more cypress mulch for me, even if it is the best.

Here in Memphis I have successfully planted four cypress trees and rehabilitated a fifth. Three were along a creek and two were on a man-made lake shore.

I have long believed that the key to making levees and earthen dams that would resist floods and hurricanes were to plant the levees and dams with strands of cypress. Turns out, according to this article, I was right.

Need to get an upper Mississippi River Cypress levee project going. All the seeds would float downstream and repopulate the delta.

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Mark from Pennsylvania 04/06/2008 08:36 PM

Amazing, it takes a person not even born in this country to care for it. How pathetically sad for you falsely patriotic overly capitalist nimrods that can't see twenty years down the road only twenty g's in the pocket. Hundreds of years of growth gone for landscapes...pathetic.

Flag

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Martin 04/08/2008 01:24 AM

Amazing how we think we have the right to complain about people cutting down the rain forest in another part of the world, when we can't even control what's happening in our own back yard. When it comes to sustainability, the U.S. ought to be ashamed of itself.

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kelley 04/16/2008 02:55 AM

money is the root of all evil....as evidenced here....how many accounts of pure greed & political bureaucracy do we need to get people's attention?...

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AD 01/06/2009 12:33 AM

People are so stupid. Why when we are trying to restore this great state that the stupid cypress loggers decide Hey let's go cut these cypress trees protecting this state down and make money and put the people that live there in jeopardy. Screw cypress loggers. They have no hearts and Im going into being an environmentalist and I will push the ban of all cypress logging in the state. I guarantee you of that. This is just ridiculous.

Flag

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AD 01/06/2009 12:38 AM

I apologize how I sounded in that last message. This stuff just really bothers me cause I'm from South Louisiana and just enjoy the beauty of this area and I just want to protect it and I hope alot more people feel like I do. Let's save the wetlands together and ban this evil thing that these people do to these cypress forests. I have faith in God and our government that this will eventually come to an end.

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