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# The Basinkeeper



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GEORGE MORRIS / THE ADVOCATE

## Dean Wilson's 'tireless' and 'tenacious' efforts to protect the Atchafalaya Basin earn recognition

GEORGE MORRIS  
Advocate staff writer

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At the controls of his homemade bateau, well-tanned and speaking in an accent that, at times, is as impenetrably thick as the Atchafalaya Basin he loves so much, it is easy to think that Dean Wilson sprang from the dark, damp soil around his Bayou Sorrel home.

But, like some of the life in this vast swamp, Wilson is a transplant. Those concerned about it are happy he came.

Earlier this summer, Wilson received the 2011 Tom's of Maine River Heroes award by the River Network, a national organization that works for watershed protection. The honor recognizes his work as director of Atchafalaya Basinkeeper, which publicizes threats to the Basin from

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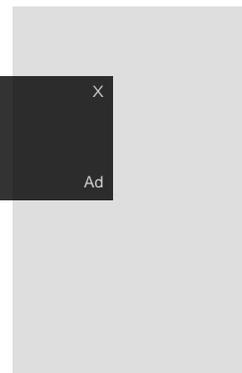
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industry, landowners and law enforcement of environmental laws.

“He is absolutely No. 1 in terms of protecting the Atchafalaya,” said John Ettinger, an Environmental Protection Agency official based in New Orleans. “He is tireless. He is tenacious. He is fearless. He is absolutely committed to it at a profound level. He loves that swamp, and he’s fighting for it.”

“He’s like the story of the guy in the Netherlands with the finger in the dike,” said Corinne Van Dalen, an attorney with the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic. “He’s that guy.”

Wilson, 49, was born in Spain to an American serviceman and Spanish wife. They divorced when Wilson was a baby, and he grew up in northern Spain. Though a U.S. citizen because of his father, Wilson did not come to this country until just before his 21st birthday, speaking Spanish and French but not a word of English.

At that point, Wilson didn’t plan to stay long. He wanted to go to the Amazon as a volunteer to report on environmental threats to the rain forest and its indigenous people from agricultural, ranching and logging interests.

But Wilson knew that growing up in northern Spain, which has a climate much like America’s Pacific Northwest, had not prepared him for life in the Amazonian wilderness.

“I realized the first time a mosquito bit me and I got a big welt, and I thought, ‘I’m going to have thousands of them biting me every day. I’m going to look like the lake monster,’ ” he said.

So, he came to Baton Rouge, where Wilson met someone who got permission for him to camp on an isolated tract of land in St. Martin Parish. Wilson stayed there for five months, sleeping on a hammock in a tent. He occasionally went to a store to buy fruit and vegetables, but otherwise hunted and fished for his meals using a borrowed pirogue.

“I fell in love with the swamp,” he said. “The first time I saw the swamp I thought I was in the Garden of Eden. When you see all the cypress trees, they’re so green and so beautiful. ... They have a special light green in the spring. You see the egrets flying around like white angels. All the water and the blue sky, wow. It was a beautiful place, one of the most beautiful places in my life.”

The Atchafalaya had become more than a place to train for the wilderness. Later, when Wilson became convinced that European media were little interested in the Amazon, he decided to make the Basin his home.

In 1987, Wilson became a commercial fisherman. He took an abandoned oil camp at Bayou Sorrell and turned it into a home for his wife and, eventually, three children. (Wilson is remarried, with another child.) Like many around him, he caught crawfish and all manner of finfish commercially, filled his freezer with frog meat in August and hunted during dry seasons.

“My kids grew up fishing with me in the boat, so it wasn’t the kind of living where you go to the office and your family stays home, and at night you see them and you’re worn out,” he said. “The kids come with me in the boat. They came when they were 2 years old. When my son

was 3, he already was helping in the boat. He wasn't just sitting in the boat. He was cleaning out my tray and doing work, and he was loving it. It's more family oriented than any other job that I know.

"We didn't have a lot of money, but we were very rich in many ways. We had the best food in the world. We had no bills, no debt. I paid everything cash during the season. It was pretty good."

But, like the original Eden, change was happening in the Atchafalaya.

In the 1990s, Wilson learned of plans for cypress logging. Though the current trees are new growth that followed Atchafalaya logging early in the 20th century and many are too small for timber, there was a market for cypress mulch.

"I was very concerned about that, so I started contacting environmental groups that I knew at the time, and I just got brushed off," Wilson said. "They really didn't care. I went on like that all through the '90s, and in the year 2000 they actually started cutting the trees for mulch, and there wasn't anything to stop it, so that's when I started getting involved."

Wilson joined the Sierra Club and began agitating for action. He started a swamp tours business, using it as a platform for people to learn about the swamp's beauty and threats to its future.

In 2003, one tour customer was a friend of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is president of the Waterkeeper Alliance, an organization that seeks to protect watersheds worldwide. Told of Wilson's passion for the swamp, Kennedy called him, and in 2004 Wilson's proposal to start the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper was approved.

In that role, Wilson entered the fray over cypress logging in the Atchafalaya and Maurepas swamps, an issue with many sides — landowner rights, the state's economic interests, disagreements over the sustainability of cypress logging. Wilson's main argument was that the swamps' value for hurricane protection, wildlife and tourism far exceed the value of the timber.

"You would think with the state of Louisiana asking for billions of dollars for coastal restoration and protection, and the value they're giving us and what represents Louisiana best is the swamps, the state of Louisiana would take it very seriously to protect these wetlands," Wilson said. "It's completely the opposite."

Wilson and Atchafalaya Basinkeeper began fighting every permit application for logging. Using aircraft from the nonprofit SouthWinds organization, they discovered and reported illegal logging and mulching operations. They followed and photographed trucks hauling mulch from the swamps to its destination. As a result, they learned that mulch was sold in packages that seem to indicate the contents came from Florida when they really came from Louisiana.

With that information, Basinkeeper approached major retailers, Home Depot and Lowes and created a moratorium on mulch from the Louisiana coast. Wal-Mart went a step further, refusing to buy mulch made in Louisiana. Eventually, mulching operations stopped in the Atchafalaya.

"I don't like to say anything has gone away or completely over or we're

out of the woods, if you'll excuse the metaphor, but the concern over clear-cutting and unsustainable cypress logging has certainly gone way down," Ettinger said

Which turns Wilson's attention to other issues, some of which have been going on for years: oilfield canals that change water flow, dams built across canals and bayous that change it further, siltation that turns swampland into upland, pollution, invasive plant and animal species. Wilson likens his role to that of a chess player, who has to plan for a variety of scenarios.

"We try to play the next 20 moves and see what happens," Wilson said.

"He's a tireless advocate for the Atchafalaya," Van Dalen said. "He is this voice, and he's able to get attention because he's so determined, but he's one person. I just think he's done an incredible amount to focus public awareness on all of the threats to this resource.

"There's nobody like him. I'm certain of it."

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