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The Basinkeeper calls for backup

by [Ken Grissom](#)

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Bayou Duquesne – Basinkeeper Dean Wilson snapped his cell phone shut with a relieved smile.

“The best thing about this program is the volunteers,” he said. “Help is on the way.”

The program to which he referred is the “waterkeeper” concept pioneered on the Hudson River years ago and now replicated across the country. Bodies of water threatened by pollution or other destructive factors are protected by local non-profits supported by membership dues and volunteers.

After decades as a commercial fisherman in the Atchafalaya Basin, Wilson now serves as a non-profit swamp ranger, investigating environmental problems, reporting them to the authorities – and filing suit when the authorities, as sometimes happens, fail to act.

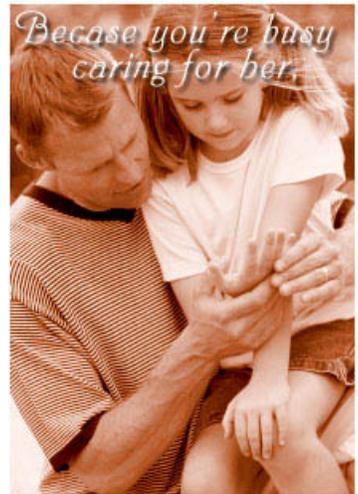
Case in point is the earthen bridge across Bayou Duquesne built and then just abandoned by the Bayou Jack Logging Company of Plaquemine, which harvested timber on both sides of the bayou.

The bridge dammed up a natural bayou marked as a canoe trail leading into the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers’ Indian Bayou Recreational Area. Canoes and kayaks could easily portage the dam if it weren’t for the water hyacinth backing up behind it for half a mile or so. The effect is to close off any and all boat traffic through a vast area north of Indian Bayou.

Which might be to somebody’s liking, it turns out.

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When the Corps seemed to be dragging its feet on enforcing Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act – no damming up navigable waterways without a permit – Wilson sicced the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic on Bayou Jack.

The company came around and promised that as soon as the annual flood receded they would go back and remove the bridge.



Since Cory Werk and I had found the bridge while scouting a Basin itinerary for his Breaux Bridge-based kayak livery, Wilson asked me to accompany him back to the site, to make sure the logging company kept its promise.



We went in my canoe, a couple of miles down Bayou Courtableau, springing off into Bayou Duquesne for maybe 100 yards before coming to a big thick raft of water hyacinth.

We slugged nearly all the way through it but then realized the back end was a solid log jam. No paddling through that. So we went to the bank (not as easily as it sounds) and, as Werk and I had done, struck out on foot to inspect the dam.

That didn't last too long. Tallow trees and briars had taken over the clear-cut, and Wilson, from long habit, patrols the swamps in pretty much his BVDs, which is fine in a boat but no bueno in the bush.

That was when he fell back on his associations. He called David Allemond of McGee's Landing, a generous and active supporter of the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper organization. And even through this is the height of the tourist season, Allemond and his nephew, Trey Allemond, soon came sliding around the bend in an airboat like the U.S. Cavalry to the rescue.

The airboat had no problem with the lilies or even the log jam. Soon we saw for ourselves that Bayou Jack had not kept its promise. While there was a big gap in the bridge now, that could have easily been washed out by the winter's flood. Much of the bridge remains.

What was even more disturbing was the number of large, live trees lying perpendicular across the bayou. They weren't sawn and it wasn't caused by bank erosion. Wilson wondered aloud if they had been shoved over with heavy machinery.

In any case, the trees block passage down the bayou as or more effectively as the bridge – another Section 10 violation, if purposeful.

Wilson is not waiting for the Corps to act this time. He's launching his own investigation, which is what waterkeepers do.

With a little help from their friends.



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