

# The Dying Louisiana Wetlands

John M. Desmond  
Pacifica Graduate Institute

*This article explores the loss of the Louisiana wetlands from an eco-psychology viewpoint. The causes of the deterioration of Louisiana's coastal wetlands include direct ones such as the building of canals, pipelines, and levee systems, and more importantly, humanity's disconnection from the voices of nature and the wilderness. This article takes the reader to the dying edge of a continent, and invites the reader to adopt a new vision of our place within the world.*

## *A Wetlands Eulogy*

She rests here like she has for thousands of years.  
This has been her fertile ground,  
A soft spot at the edge of a continent,  
A home for migrating birds and gentle sea grasses and abundant life yet  
unnamed.

She has called me to her funeral ceremony.  
I am to give the eulogy to a single audience.  
I tell her how beautiful she was.  
I tell her how fertile she was.  
I tell her how we will miss the protection she provided.

I tell her that there are men who are trying to save her.  
The dollars will be allocated soon.  
The plan has been generally agreed upon.  
The floods will soon be here to strengthen you.

She is less than optimistic.  
Her lands are weakened by the canals and pipelines.  
Global warming has lifted the seas higher than ever before.  
The sediment from the North has not visited here for years.  
This is her retreat, and it is not entirely within our control.

Don't give up yet, I pray.  
You are a strong woman,  
Despite your current weakness.  
Help is on the way.

She listens, but she is wise in reserving her trust.  
Men have lied to her before.

The Louisiana wetlands are dying. Home of 40% of the coastal wetlands in the lower 48 states, Louisiana has lost up to forty square miles of marsh per year for several decades. Without a response, an additional 800,000 acres of wetland will disappear by the year 2040. If this happens, the Louisiana coastline will advance inland by as much as thirty-three miles in some areas. Up to a third of the state's shoreline could be wiped out by 2050 (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

These wetlands were built over thousands of years by the Mississippi River. Sediment from the river was responsible for creating a series of overlapping delta lobes. In a slow dance of creation of vegetation filled marshes, gave way to flooding, then open water, and then re-creation, the Mississippi River created millions of acres of wetlands, four million of which made it into the twentieth century. In the last sixty years, over a million of these acres have been converted into open water (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

The causes of Louisiana wetland loss are multifaceted. The wetlands' problems date back to 1928, when the Mississippi River was corralled by levees and dams. This was done to prevent flooding from damaging property. In the effort to prevent flood damage, the constrictions placed on the river's natural tendencies kept the sediment of the river from reaching the deltaic plain. It is this sediment that had replenished the coast's wetlands for thousands of years. (American Land Rights Association, 2000; Brudeau, 2003).

While the river's diversion is a primary cause of the wetlands loss, other factors also have played a role. Canals, dredged for navigation or in support of oil and mineral extraction, have allowed saltwater to penetrate into previously fresh marshes. The placement of straight canals in areas previously drained by sinuous natural channels has increased the speed of tidal movements through the coastal marshes. This saltwater intrusion stresses plant productivity and compromises the inherent ability of most wetland vegetation to withstand submergence (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

Additionally, subsidence, which occurs naturally in these sediment built lands, has been accelerated as a result of the river's diversion and as a result of oil and gas exploration. Compounding the problems, global sea level rise and the breakup of the barrier island systems allow more salt water

submersion of these delicate lands, further weakening the lands' subsurface and ability to exist (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

Groups have come forth fighting for solutions. But their arguments seem to be drafted in overly scientific and financially practical terms. While these arguments are valid, they are spoken from a voice that ignores the sacredness of the land. Their arguments focus on only a narrow part of the human experience, inflating the economic vantage point, while silencing the mandala universe (Synder, 1990). The silencing evidences a loss of care, a loss of our deeper humanity (Griffin, 2000). Listen for what is missing in their concerns:

*Port Fourchon is key to the nation's oil supply, as are the oil pipelines running to the port through the wetlands.*

*The wetlands buffers Louisiana against hurricanes and storms. They hold excess floodwaters during high rainfall and high tides. They recharge groundwater used for drinking waters and irrigation. They clean water by filtering pollution and taking up nutrients.*

*The wetlands serve as a foundation for the \$1 billion seafood industry, and \$200 million sport hunting industry, the \$14 million alligator industry, valuable fur resources, hardwood timbers and commercial livestock.*

*The loss of wetlands will result in a severe financial blow to the state and the nation and a loss of thousands of jobs.*

Surely those who fight for this collection of silt and the miracles of life that spring forth from her know that it is not about the job loss or cost to desalinize salt water. Surely, they are protecting a part of creation solely because she deserves our protection—solely because we are the ones who aided in her destruction.

I travel to her shores to listen to the sounds which come singing from her unreachable places. I watch as the wind caresses her curves and make the grass thickets shiver. I feel the warmth of this brackish water. This place is unlivable for men. At this place I visit by boat, there is no place to stand without being engulfed. There is no place to build a home. There is no way to drive a car here.

Alligators could be lurking behind any enticing collection of brush. Poisonous snakes could be poised to attack. Perhaps, I think, no man has ever gone back into this exact place in the swampy wetland, and I do not wish to be the first if she is a virgin. I prefer her to remain innocent if she is. The commentators for actions do not use this language of compassion. They propose to provide fresh water and silt in flooding fashions at various

levee breaks to “simulate” natural flow. Their three point plan, like their understanding of the problem, is written in disconnected voice:

First, the plan requires restoring the function of the barrier islands, cheniers and other shorelines. These provide a first line of defense against the intrusion of the sea. Without these boundaries, the inland areas will be susceptible to wind and wave damage.

Secondly, the plan seeks to restore natural water flow. The plan seeks to mimic the natural flooding of the Mississippi River into the coastal wetland areas, while controlling the water flow to prevent flooding of populated areas. The plan will reconnect waterways and modify man-made canals to maximize the controlled use of fresh water into the chenier and deltaic plains.

Lastly, the plan requires diverting fresh water and sediment into coastal wetlands using the reconnected waterways. The project will only use water in the late winter and early spring so as not to affect water supplies needed for navigation or drinking water. The diversion will be accomplished without flooding communities or damaging infrastructure.

All of this will save money in the long run. (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

I rewrite their words so she can hear, and I pray them at her. “The northern waters will soon run over you again. The waters will energize and fertilize you. You will grow from their unheeded advancement and produce miracle upon miracle of life.”

This place takes special pleasure in revealing its soul to those who look and listen from a wider perspective which embraces a cultivation of humanity’s restoration, not of the wilderness, but with the wilderness. (Snyder, 1990). Eco-psychology is the search for and recognition of the world’s soul. These wetlands, by and large, offer no hint of mankind. But through their slow death and retreat downward into the gulf they have awakened mankind, albeit through the pain of lost profits and foreboding expense.

I drift among the outer barrier islands. Strangers before have come to similar islands in recent years to plant marsh grasses to strengthen the structure of her soil. They came because they cared about her. They cared not about the pipelines or property values, but because they wished to help her stand up against battles she had lost the ability to win on her own. They

came to rescue a part of a retreating soul.

The tides lap against the soft, unobtrusive, gentle lands of the barrier islands weakened by both hurricanes, oil pipelines and the unnatural flood water diversions. It occurs to me that she may be licking her wounds.

They say the barrier islands have provided great protection from hurricanes to lower Louisiana. They buffer the storm surge protecting the near or below sea level areas by holding back some of the most powerful forces Mother Nature can produce.

Without these barriers, mankind is exceptionally vulnerable. The Port of New Orleans, a vital U.S. shipping port could be shut down if a full strength hurricane filled the below sea level city with water faster than the pumping stations could respond. Insurance companies use words like “catastrophic” and “unimaginable” to describe worse case scenarios. They say New Orleans has been “lucky” so far (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

I listen to her lick her wounds and wonder how angry she has become. Her retreat is not a result caused solely by mankind. Perhaps it is also a strategic tactic as well. Maybe she is preparing for the counter attack.

I pray at her. Please forgive those who have harmed you. Their motives were not always pure but they were generally without intent to harm. Intent requires consciousness. I pray for consciousness.

A gust of wind and sea mist strikes my back. “Her moist breath,” I think. It is her acknowledgment of the need for our consciousness, our re-connection.

These wetlands were created over thousands of years. Grasses grew here before man built his first wheel. This was a place on the edge. Not water, not earth. Not ground, not sky. From the beginning, it can be imagined that the land’s soul had a purpose that was at least partially the protection of the lands to the north whose silt had built her (American Land Rights Association, 2000).

Listening at the edge, where the waters and land meet, reveals certain rhythms. The knowledge of what has been taking place here reveals why those rhythms have been changing, but they also reveal humanity’s own changes. The changing rhythms evidence the disconnection of mankind from the previous harmony of life disrupted by a world view dominated by self-centered and economic interests.

The death of the wetlands parallels the dying of our own humanity. Just as the great architects of the Mississippi River Levee System built channels and levees to direct its otherwise wild course, we build walls and

make commitments that keep the free and spontaneous parts of ourselves from running amok. We embrace rules of justice and the predetermined punishments that revenge mandates and reserve time for teaching rules of compassion and forgiveness only to children or only on Sundays. These walls and these rules deprive us of the outlook and the actions necessary to fertilize our lives with the needed moisture and silt that compassion and the freedom of spirit provide. Instead we accept dry, albeit materially successful lives, content that we have succeeded in avoiding the pain or frustration of unknown courses of actions. And like the wetlands, a part of our humanity is weakened and is dying.

I read the research again examining the reasons for actions in search of clues: “cost savings,” “land loss,” “future expenses,” “lost industry,” “hurricane damage.” These are not voices of love for nature and her beauty. These are not voices of sadness for a disappearance of a part of creation. These are voices created by a type of narcissism. It is a voice that cares only for itself (Synder, 2004).

To the politician and scientist my call to hear the wider voice perhaps seems unnecessary. They now agree that a solution must be had. Why should they be required to hear the voice of compassion for nature, not as a resource, but on her own terms? (Kidner, 2001; Griffin, 2000). Listening to nature’s voice is important because the separation exists in the first place. The cause of the wetlands loss may appear to be the building of levees, but in reality it was caused by the failure to listen to nature’s voice and to her response when the levees were first created. Instead, mankind was listening only to the projected losses caused by uncontrolled flooding and to projected profits of oil and mineral extraction.

David Kidner (2001), in *Nature and Psyche: Radical Environmentalism and the Politics of Subjectivity*, points out that environmentalists fail to provide a vision outside of objecting to projects that impact the environment. They fail to provide a vision outside a protest movement. Kidner suggests a need for a new place for humankind to understand its relation to the world, a place where humankind is not divided from nature. It is only at this undivided place that the new vision can be seen. At this place, we may fully understand the vision and hear the formerly disconnected voices that will lead us forward out of the death we have visited on ourselves. With this vision, we can articulate the insights, recover our relationship with the earth, and reestablish congruence. This is the new vision, the cultural ecology, which the world so badly needs (Kidner, 2001).

Sitting at the edge of these wetlands, I suddenly find myself at a loss for words of prayer. Instead, I just sit with her as I would a dying relative praying for recovery. It is a special moment I will remember. It is special because I connect with her and her with me. Appropriately, this is a space of “being,” not a space of “doing.”

It is a simple thought that comes upon leaving. We must learn to live on our earth connected to her. We must understand that she speaks to us. We are called to a state of reverie. We are called to listen both objectively and subjectively, both with consciousness and intuition. We are called to see and hear and feel the spirit of the place beyond the hard understandings of scientific observation and economic justifications (Synder, 2004). Without this poetic embrace of nature, we cannot see past the surface and will not see the new vision necessary for our world.

As I leave her, I whisper to her a promise that help is on the way. She listens, but she is wise in reserving her trust. Men have lied to her before.

*Postscript in light of Hurricane Katrina*

On Friday, August 26, 2005, while on my way to a pre-season New Orleans Saints football game at the Louisiana Superdome, I learned that *Janus Head* had accepted the above paper for publication. Less than a day later, I was gathering important paperwork, loading the car, and evacuating my family from Hurricane Katrina, then a Category 5 storm.

In editing the paper, I debated removing the references to the “catastrophic damage” that “could” hit New Orleans and shut down the Port, as well as suggestions that Mother Nature may be planning a “counter attack.” Hurricane Katrina was an angry storm that did shut down the Port and caused catastrophic damage as a result of the levee wall breaks. New Orleans is no longer considered “lucky” with respect to hurricane paths. Notwithstanding the outdated nature of the writing, I decided to leave those portions unchanged, believing that the unedited text serves the ignored voices of the wilderness better than an edited version. To me, it is adequate snapshot of our former blindness and inaction.

Since Katrina, there is a sense that everyone is looking for someone to blame. The Mayor, the Governor, the President, FEMA, even the American Red Cross, have all been criticized. Lawyers from across the country have filed all sorts of lawsuits. Oil companies have been sued for global warming. The levee boards, levee contractors, and engineers have all hired defense teams.

The Army Corps of Engineers is considering eliminating the man made 76-mile long Mississippi River Gulf Outlet navigational channel believed to have allowed a higher storm surge.

While the region may ultimately find someone to blame, Katrina's legacy is more likely to be tied to the reasons we were not ready for the attack. If we listen closely, we can hear a voice coming from the edge of our continent. She is telling us of our disconnection from nature. She is telling us of the distortions caused by our self-centered thinking. She is telling us of the loss of sacredness, and the need for a new vision.

It is becoming difficult not to hear her.

### *References*

American Land Rights Association (2000). *Louisiana coast wetlands losses: Are federal Outer Continental Shelf activities responsible? Appendix C—Additional authoritative summaries of the Louisiana wetlands loss problem, causes, and solutions*. Retrieved December 28, 2005 American Land Rights Association website: <http://www.landrights.org/OCS/OCS-LA.wetlands.C.pdf>.

Brudeau, C. (2003). *Delta blues: Louisiana's coast has eroded faster than previously thought*. Retrieved December 28, 2005 from Water Conserve—A Water Conservation Portal: <http://www.waterconserve.info/articles/reader.asp?linkid=22889>.

Griffin, S. (2000). *Woman and nature: The roaring inside her*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.

Kidner, D. (2001). *Nature and psyche: Radical environmentalism and the politics of subjectivity*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Synder, G. (2004). *The practice of the wild*. San Francisco: Shoemaker & Hoard.