ACADIADA - The Atchafalaya Basin is a unique fishing hole. Finding bass in the network of canals and ditches is one thing, but in a bass tournament, getting back for the weigh-in is more important.

"Keep chasing fishing line you're throwing, and it'll lead you everywhere but back out of the swamp," says Clay Fontenot, director of the Atchafalaya Basin Commission, of some groups concerned about the future of the Basin.

Coming west from Louisiana's capital city of Baton Rouge, a traveler to Cajun Country, crosses the Atchafalaya Swamp on the 1-10 Expressway. It's a fast trip. 18 miles from the East to the West Guide Levee. The Louisiana Highway Department won a national award for this paved monument. It was one of 10 awards presented for "Engineering Achievement" in the country five years ago. Viewing from the interstate is how most folks see a swamp. Getting across the swamp this way is not difficult, however it was expensive to build. The cost of the Swamp Expressway was $5.9 million per mile.

Contestants in the 1978 B.A.S.S. Champions Tournament, April 24-28, are facing a challenge. The 20 handpicked anglers are chasing bass worth $30,000 in the "Pro Bowl of Bass Fishing." To give every angler an equal opportunity, the Atchafalaya Basin has been off limits since the tournament location was announced by the sponsoring Bass Anglers Sportsman Society.

"The Atchafalaya is a vast network of bayous and canals winding back into the woodlands and swamps. After awhile, all the channels start looking alike," says Fontenot of Baton Rouge. He added, "I wouldn't recommend anyone going into the Atchafalaya unless he has a guide, or a dang good map."

Wet And Wild

Yes, but "wet and wild" is how most sportsmen prefer it. Many people from outside Louisiana think of the "Bayou State" as one vast swamp. In reality, Louisiana has few true swamps. They may be in danger of losing their most famous one - the Atchafalaya River Basin.

"Will the Atchafalaya stay wet and wild, or will it be dredged and drained is a question that concerns environmentalists and sportsmen, and the reason the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society selected the unique Champions tournament site," according to Ray Scott, president of the Montgomery, Ala. based fishing conservation organization.

Hopefully, the week-long bassin' happening and the fishing by such national tournament stars as Rick Clunn, the defending champs tournament winner and back-to-back championship of the BASS Masters Classic, and Roland Martin, the all-time BASS money winner, will stimulate interest in preserving the remaining 800,000 acres of wilderness and wildlife.

A national press-agent corps of 20 newspaper outdoor editors, television sports directors, radio, outdoor and travel magazine representatives will take part. They'll be judges in the April 26-28 fishing. And, in part be the jury on the future of the Atchafalaya, a Chocataw Indian phrase meaning, "long river."

The river basin has been a long-time survivor in southern Louisiana. Centuries could neither tame nor destroy, but the progress of man threatens to ruin it. The Atchafalaya River Basin has always been a vital outlet for the Mississippi's floodwaters, a strong and powerful river whose backwaters sprawl across a territory larger than the entire state of Delaware.

The primary channel runs for about 100 miles from Simmesport to the bay. And, in some places, the Basin stretches out to 18 miles in width, covering portions of seven parishes. It has been an extremely productive area for fish and wildlife. As a result, the bayous have become known as a moss-shadowed fish hatchery for southern Louisiana, as well as, a key southern roost for the Mississippi Flyway.

Anglers find great fishing for largemouth bass, called "green trout" by some natives. Catfish, green-eye perch, the sac-lait (crappie) and spotted bass are caught in the endless miles of twisting unmarked trails and pipeline canals. As many as 10 million pounds of crawfish a year have been netted from the Atchafalaya's ponds and ditches. And, one of the South's few places left for backwater bear is here. The endangered national symbol - the bald eagle - finds refuge in the swamp alongside the mink, bobcat, river otter and some 300 different species of American birds. Alligators are common. For the winter, the woodcock arrives.

Sportsman Paradise

This is a "Sportsman's Paradise," but trouble is brewing. In the early 1970's, sportsmen suddenly realized that the last great over flow swamp in the Bayou State was the Atchafalaya. The Corps of Engineers, without apparent warning, had decided to dig a huge ditch right down the middle of the Atchafalaya. The Corps' word for ditch digging was "channelization." And, their reasoning was the "prevention of flooding."

Yes, the Corps was embarking on a program of protecting a floodway designed to be flooded from flooding.

The channelization project ripped apart - and dried up - the top third of the Basin before environmentalists realized what was happening and launched a crusade to put a halt to the dredging.

Sportsmen became concerned that the project would eliminate the annual river overflow, dry up the vast wetland and in the end remove the periodic water cycle that ultimately was responsible for putting crawfish in the ponds and black bass among the cypress trees.

Bass Plan

"We thought we had this Atchafalaya thing solved about five years ago," said Hutchens, in referring to a multi-purpose plan produced by an inter-agency private citizens task force. The plan would take into account the Basin's ecological, recreational and economical values, as into the night, vehicles carrying sportsmen, trappers, anglers, commercial fishermen, tourists and campers were flagged down and the drivers questioned.

Officials wanted to know just what kind of fish had been caught, how many of them had been hooked, how many days the people had spent in the Basin, and how many miles they had driven to reach the Atchafalaya.

The final result was staggering. It was discovered that the Atchafalaya River Basin was worth more than $47 million a year in wildlife resources alone. Even those who weren't concerned with a swamp's ecological importance were duly impressed with its economic value, according to Charles Hutchens, national coordinator of the Atchafalaya Information Bureau, headquartered in Lafayette.

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well as its flood-control objectives.

After Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, it triggered the Corps into producing an Environmental Impact Statement for such projects as the Basin. It resulted in the group effort by the Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Louisiana Department of Public Works, the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Game Management at LSU, and the National Wildlife Federation, which came up with the Multi-Purpose Plan.

That plan called for the building of special structures along the floodway’s center channel in order that the flow of water and silt into the Basin’s backwater region could be regulated. It called for the purchase of easements in the Basin to assure public access, and to keep the Basin under public control for flood-control purpose.

At first, the Corps was behind the plan. Now, according to environmentalists, the support has fad-
ed in favor of the Corps’ original single-purpose, flood-control blueprint.

Concerned

Concerned conservationists view the ditching operation as a success with public funds, but the patient would die. “If wholesale development occurs, it will be unlikely that the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway would ever again be used for flood-control purposes,” believes Charles Hutchens.

“In 1973, we saw it happen. When the high water came, the Corps delayed opening up the floodway for weeks because of ‘all the development and investment in there,’ ” he recalls.

What is the future of the Atchafalaya? The final plan is expected to pop out of the Corps’ planning process at the end of this year and be forwarded to Congress early in 1979. Public hearings are scheduled for this summer - August 1978 - and they will be critical.

“Without the support of concerned citizens, the floodway will be destroyed piecemeal and with public funds,” opined Hutchens.