Cajuns in the Basin find themselves riding the shifting tides of change.

BY DEBORAH BURST

Inside the Atchafalaya Basin, outside the small town of Catahoula, a community of impassioned people rich in Cajun heritage fight to preserve their countryside. Among them: Greg Guiraud, a Cajun author, photographer and lecturer, and Toni Swenson DeBosier, a forester with the state Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Catahoula is a bayou hamlet filled with neighbors who dedicate their educational and vocational talents to revitalizing the community, standing firm in the Cajun’s shifting tides of change.

The mighty Mississippi fights to gain the path of least resistance as it charges down to the Atchafalaya River rather than making a right turn through New Orleans. The Army Corps of Engineers governs this flow, which brings a high amount of silt to the Atchafalaya, reducing its water levels and filling in the swamps. Without the diversion of the river’s flow, New Orleans and Baton Rouge perish along with the lucrative oil, maritime, hydrocarbon and chemical industries.

For centuries, the Basin offered the Cajuns a home and livelihood, as well as providing a paradise for hunters, fishermen, boaters, nature photographers and outdoor enthusiasts. But how long will it last? The Mississippi River silt dams natural boat channels leaving the Basin unnavigable for many rural crawfishermen. Low water levels decrease the amount of harvested crawfish. Fragmentation caused by levees and silt

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dams negatively influence the water quality, killing nutrients and destroying the basin's ecosystems. The government has formed the Atchafalaya Basin Program, which works with the Corps and many other agencies to help benefit and protect the area.

Sandra Thompson, executive director of the Atchafalaya Basin Program, manages the $250 million budget with several Basin projects in place, including river hydrology levels, dredge out silt, shave levees to improve water flow, enhance eco-tourism and educate the public. The Basin program meets with numerous local groups throughout the 84 parishes to receive their input on the Atchafalaya and the personal accounts of his life in the swamps aboard a houseboat in Atchafalaya Autumn. Guirard is not alone in the education process. His neighbor, DeBosier, lends a helping hand as well.

A proud woman in her 40s who fought the Corps and many other agencies to create a new brand of culture. The Basin carries a dose of knit community bartering time, talents and properties, gaining wisdom and traditions from their roots. Guirard says he hasn't lost hope. "There is an almost mystical connection between Cajun fishermen and the swamp," he says, "a desire not only to see but to touch, to be part of the wilderness, to be in concert with the big woods... no matter how difficult the struggle.""}

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DeBosier's books and DeBosier's social education touch many lives. The Cajuns' pioneering spirit lives on in these two, working to blend the past with the present to create a new brand of culture. The Basin carries a dose of knit community bartering time, talents and properties, gaining wisdom and traditions from their roots. Guirard says he hasn't lost hope.

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There are more than 600 local crawfishermen who have land improvise by developing aquaculture farms where annual rice and crawfish crops cycle during the year; "Some of the locals have land improve by developing aquaculture farms where annual rice and crawfish crops cycle during the year," DeBosier says. "The Basin is no longer a natural system. Man intervened with canals, levees, channelization of waterways and lots of diverted sediment, all of which have accelerated the decline of this forested swamp ecosystem."

Without some deep water areas, says DeBosier, the hoop-net, crawfishermen and finfishermen are losing their craft, their jobs, their heritage.

"These proud people should be left to live as deliberately as they choose," she says. Both sides work to preserve the Basin, both sides risk losing century-old cultures, and the Cajuns struggle to find a solution to this socioeconomic dilemma.

Guirard holds a bachelor of arts degree in agronomy, a master's in English literature and is a published photographer. Guirard uses his books as a platform to educate the public on the Atchafalaya and the Cajun way of life: Atchafalaya's mystical landscape in Seasons of Light; the intriguing Cajun families in The Cajun Families of the Atchafalaya; the decimation of giant cypress trees in The Land of Dead Giants; and the personal accounts of his life in the swamps aboard a houseboat in Atchafalaya Autumn.

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