They'll come to watch our flowers growing — outside the new Welcome Center off I-10 at the Butte La Rose exit.
What do Sri Lanka, Kenya and Acadiana have in common? On the surface, very little — besides tropical monsoons that could double as hurricanes and economies reliant on petroleum and agriculture. But if you dig a bit deeper, you'll find government and civic leaders in all three areas championing ecotourism.

A buzz phrase for the last decade in Bayou Country, ecotourism is a style of tourism marketing based on an area's natural resources, whether it's people, food or a treasured landmark. Rather than touting a museum or hall of government, ecotourism calls for commercials and brochures to highlight recreational activities, adventure travel and wilderness parks in a responsible light.

It all boils down to being a part of nature, and travel industry officials say more than 23 million Americans go looking for it each year. That could mean whitewater rafting for some, hiking trails for others. And it doesn't take Dr. Phil to analyze that most of these travelers are searching for an escape from the Rat Race and their dollar-driven lives.

In an ironic twist, it's also important to note that Americans spend more than $10 billion annually on wildlife-related ecotourism. Officials in Louisiana alone say regional ecotourism activities have grown at a rate of 10 percent to 15 percent per year and there are no signs of slowing. As long as an area is strong in the areas described above, the sky is the limit.

As such, ecotourism seems to be custom-made for Louisiana, with its hundreds of miles of bayous, lush wildlife and vibrant culture. It also embodies

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As tourists near the new Welcome Center, they will be greeted with sounds from the swamp in the parking lot and Cajun and Zydeco music as they walk closer to the building.

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everything a locale like Lafayette has to offer, according to Rob Guidry, director of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce.

"We're known as the 'Sportsman's Paradise,' which is reflective of our natural habitats for wildlife and plants indigenous to the area," Guidry says. "Ecotourism is a chance for us to showcase those natural resources."

A Strong Foundation

So it's no wonder local and statewide officials are clinging to the concept as one of the saviors of tourism. Successful private-public ventures from the past, such as designing an ecotourism preserve at Tickfaw State Park in Livingston Parish, have proven the concept can work in Louisiana.

Another key niche for Louisiana ecotourism has been shining light on landloss. By accompanying tours through the marshes of the Atchafalaya and Barataria, tourists learn firsthand how and why Louisiana loses 30 square miles of land each year.

Newly sworn in Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, the state's chief tourism official, told industry insiders in March at a travel summit that Louisiana is primed to serve as a "global economy and be an international destination" because of its unmatched qualities.

"This state, more than any other, stands unique in culture and opportunity," Landrieu said at the summit. "It has authentic cultural aspects if we can only get ourselves together and focus on it."

Ecotourism, along with Louisiana's other marketing pulls, could play a major role in the collation Landrieu has repeatedly referred to as the "New South," which includes states such as Texas, Alabama and Mississippi.

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"Tourism, economic development, recreation, the arts, museums, films, state parks, eco-tourism and wetlands are all tied together as one," he says.

A normal traveler who enjoys such activities becomes an ecotourist when they go shrimping in Cocodrie, hiking in Shreveport or even self-sunning on the beaches of Biloxi. As the trend caught fire in the '90s, regional activities like swamp tours and fishing expeditions climbed to the forefront. But progress in this area is predicated on ongoing and future projects.

"One of our goals is to make Atchafalaya a household word by 2010 as we promote eco-tourism in Louisiana," says Sandra Thompson, executive director of the Atchafalaya Basin Program. "This visitor's center is unlike any other — it invites the traveler to behold the charm and beauty of southern, Acadian-style living."

The upkeep of the stock is the responsibility of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

A Perfect Match

State Rep. Ernie Alexander, R-Lafayette, says the Basin and welcome center are a perfect match.

"I think ecotourism works well everywhere, but we have scenic wonderland here," he says. "It attracts the kind of person who is interested in the outdoors. We just have great land down here."

The Department of Natural Resources has overseen the surveying, engineering, architectural and landscape design costs for the project. Officials there contend the project has moved along as planned with little hold-ups. "Louisiana is already well known worldwide for its food and music," says Scott Angelle, DNR secretary. "But I feel like the welcome center is something else some visitors will remember."

Angelle, who was recently appointed to his post by Gov. Kathleen Blanco, adds he is fortunate to come into the job with a project that deals with several agencies, allowing him to assess the

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lay of the political land and develop future partnerships with the departments of recreation and transportation. The state Department of Transportation and Development paid

**A well-rounded tourism program demands much more than hiking trails and swamp tours.**

all construction costs for the facility, including a boat landing and truck parking facilities on the north side. The department used enhancement and interstate maintenance funds to bankroll their portion, according to Dr. Kam Movassaghi, who recently stepped down as DOTD secretary. For future operations, the center will be funded with federal highway enhancement dollars.

Although ecotourism continues to be the buzz phrase of choice in Louisiana, movers and shakers like Landrieu are quick to caution that a well-rounded tourism program demands much more than hiking trails and swamp tours.

"Are we just tourism?" Landrieu asks. "Are we just state parks? Are we just cultural development? Are we just museums? Are we just eco-tourism? We are all that and more."

Jeremy Alford is a freelance writer living in Baton Rouge. To comment on this article, e-mail timesedit@timesofacadiana.com: Want to share with a friend? E-mail it from our Web site, www.timesofacadiana.com.

A taste of Cajun culture awaits visitors in the high water display at the Welcome Center.