'Like a cancer,' Isle de Jean Charles land loss forces community to leave homes for federally-funded site

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The Isle de Jean Charles, an island in Terrebonne Parish and the home of the Isle de Jean Charles band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Native Americans, has experienced 98 percent land loss due to "extreme environmental changes," forcing residents to move off the island, according to a tribe news release.

The Louisiana Land Trust, on behalf of the Louisiana Office of Community Development, purchased over 500 acres of land 40 miles north of the island with federal grant money to function as a resettlement site for residents displaced by the land loss, according to a state news release.

"The site selection involved extensive research, including more than 20 separate site evaluations, technical analysis and input from island residents and other potential participants, who overwhelmingly preferred this site," the news release reads.

Chantel Comardelle, the tribal executive secretary of the Isle de Jean Charles band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, said the land loss has hurt the community not only in a physical sense, as in loss of property and resources, but in a cultural sense as well, adding the community has lost cohesiveness due to many members leaving the island.

"Our tribal cultures and traditions have just wasted away, just like the people and just like the land," Comardelle said.

Comardelle said a large part of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw culture is self-sustainability, or being able to feed oneself independently. Since the marshes have been largely lost, according to Comardelle, this way of life is no longer feasible for the community. Fishing and hunting are more difficult due to the damaged ecosystem.

"You used to be able to walk into your backyard and catch food for supper and bring it inside to cook it," Comardelle said.

Comardelle said she now takes her children to the island and points out where homes and stores used to be, many of which are gone because of loss of both land and population. She said the island has changed dramatically since she was a child.

"It's almost like a cancer. It just eats away at itself," Comardelle said. "Now it's just a skeleton of what it used to be."

The land loss also has drawn a lot of media attention to the area, including firms such as CNN and The New Yorker. Comardelle said the media presence bothers some of the island residents.

"I've had one guy say if the media paid him for interviews, he'd be able to move himself and not need help from the government ... I've heard other people say that journalists get rich off of our stories," Comardelle said.

Several media outlets have described the tribe as "climate change refugees," a term Comardelle argues is not accurate.

"I don't think the term refugees apply to us ... We have a thought-out plan for our community," Comardelle said.

Comardelle attributes the land loss to a number of factors, mainly canals dug by oil companies which disturb the balance of minerals to deposit in the marsh and allowing fresh water to flow into the marsh from the nearby Bayou LaFourche.

"We have two very large pipeline canals that run just north of the island and we can see that is the culprit," Comardelle said.

Comardelle said the tribe had input on the resettlement site and were given surveys, but the community has "mixed feelings" about moving there. She said some tribe members are likely to stay put until their homes are directly above the water.

"There's some who I know won't move until it's a dire situation. As a tribe, we respect their decision to do that," Comardelle said.

According to Comardelle, this isn't the first time the tribe has been displaced. The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe used to live east of the Mississippi River and were forced out by President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act in 1830.

Additionally, Comardelle said the state and federal government could have used alternate methods to save the island before resettling the residents, including dredging the surrounding bayous for minerals to deposit in the marsh and allowing fresh water to flow into the marsh from the nearby Bayou LaFourche.

"There is so much that could have been done and could be done now," Comardelle said, adding these measures haven't been taken due to a lack of funding.

**RESOLUTION**

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Photos by Klint Landry/The Vermilion

Saltwater intrusion kills vegetation and damages the marsh surrounding the Isle de Jean Charles, making the island more vulnerable to land loss.

Various homes and businesses have been vacated following the spread of water into the tribe's land.
Pat Forbes, executive director of the Louisiana Office of Community Development, said the new resettlement site is largely preferred by the tribe and Chief Albert Naquin.

"I asked the people about their preference ... 70 percent chose to get to higher and drier land," Forbes said, adding the tribe initially wanted to stay closer to the coast, but such land cannot be settled with federal grant money due to it also having a high risk of land loss.

When asked about whether the island could have been saved in the ways Comardelle listed, Forbes said such coastal protection efforts were outside of the duties of his office, rather are handled by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority.

"That's not in our realm of responsibility or expertise," Forbes said.

Forbes said contractors will start building homes and other structures on the resettlement site later this year.

"We, most importantly, have to do a (Housing and Urban Development) required environmental review which will take six to nine months before contractors can come in," Forbes said.

Forbes said he and others working on the project empathize with the tribe.

"We understand that it's a terribly difficult thing to pull up roots and have the courage to recognize that it won't be a sustainable place to be," Forbes said.

University of Louisiana at Lafayette education professor and oral historian Heather Stone, Ph.D., said she works to help communities "hold their history" and has worked with the tribe for years. She said she travels to the island every other month.

"I've been working with the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw for four years now ... I've traveled with the chief to D.C. to the Smithsonian to look at artifacts that are from the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw," Stone said.

Stone attributes the land loss to a lack of foresight on the part of companies and the state government.

"We don't take care of our land and we don't look to the future," Stone said, "We need to think about the full ecosystem and not just what's right there. By making short sighted decisions, there will be long term consequences for the coast of Louisiana. I think the projections are by 2050, Baton Rouge will be waterfront."

Stone said the resettlement site is safe for the tribe to move to because it is in the 500-year floodplain, meaning the land will not flood for another 500 years. Stone agreed the new land will be a change for the tribe, but argued the self-sustaining way of life the tribe had on the island has been long gone.

"They've already had to adapt. Most of them do not sustain themselves by hunting and fishing. They weren't able to do that before (the resettlement). The planned land will not be able to give them back what they had when they settled the land in the 1830s, but it will give them a chance to reinvent themselves once again on this new land," Stone said.

Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program Senior Water Resource Coordinator and Quality Assurance Manager Andrew Barron said the land loss on the coast is more likely due to natural sinking of the land and man-made interference than erosion.

"Subsidence probably plays more of a role in land loss than erosion," Barron said.

Barron said man-made causes of land loss include digging of canals and restriction of fresh water flow into the marsh.

"Some of the man-made causes are straightening and digging of streams," Barron said, "In those areas, you can see the old gas canals where they looked for oil and gas. It's like Swiss cheese."

While Barron listed other man-made causes for land loss as oil extraction and forced drainage systems such as the one in New Orleans, he warned land loss will only worsen with rising sea levels due to climate change.

"The science clearly shows our planet is warming," Barron said, "In Louisiana, we are like the canary in the coal mine when it comes to climate change."

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Senator Rex Jones also introduced the "Executive Budget Transparency Amendment."

The amendment would change