Reality TV shows drive tourists to basin's ecosystem

By Nicholas Persac
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Eight-year-old Maddy Parish steadied her point-and-shoot camera and took pictures of a young alligator before it slid off a log into the murky waters of Lake Martin.

Her grandparents, Gary and Carol Parish, recently traveled from their home in New Waverly, Texas, north of Houston, to Lake Martin to go on a swamp tour with Marcus de la Houssaye, a tour guide who lives in Carencro.

"We thought it'd be good to take our granddaughter on a swamp tour since she likes animals," Gary Parish said. "We wanted to see what it's like in real life and not just on TV."

Though Lake Martin isn't technically connected to the Atchafalaya Basin, it's in the geographic footprint of the basin, and its swampy landscape mirrors the basin's terrain. Tourists like the Parishes have flocked to the basin and this region to get a taste of what Louisiana is really like after handfuls of reality TV shows thrust the state into a national spotlight in recent years.

The basin's unique beauty offers an array of tourism opportunities, from the swamp tours to outdoor activities, and state and local tourism officials are capitalizing on Louisiana's recent TV fame by getting visitors to boost the Pelican State's economy.

"There is no question there is an uptick in interest across the country in the Atchafalaya Basin because of these reality shows, including 'Swamp People,'" Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne, who is in charge of promoting tourism in Louisiana, said during a phone interview from Baton Rouge.

"There is an interest and fascination in the beauty of the Atchafalaya Basin and the characters they show on TV."

Ben Berthelot, executive director of the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission, agreed with Dardenne's assessment. He said LCVC can provide both tourists and locals with information about making the most of the Atchafalaya Basin.

"I think it's always been a popular attraction over the years because of its uniqueness and beauty, but in speaking to some of our members and attractions, they have seen an increase in the buzz and curiosity because of things like 'Swamp People,'" Berthelot said. "They feel like it's becoming more popular that it was, specifically anything with alligators."

At this beginning of the year, Dardenne's office used a $165,000 grant from the National Parks Service to post "Atchafalaya National Heritage Area" signs along roads, like Interstates 10 and 49, throughout the 14 parishes that include part of the basin.

The 264 signs come in various designs and sizes, with some including a picture of an alligator while others show a crest with an illustration of heron or egret standing in swampy waters.

The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area, established in 2006, stretches across 14 Louisiana parishes and is "among the most culturally rich and ecologically varied regions in the United States, home to the widely recognized Cajun culture as well as a diverse population of European, African, Caribbean and Native-American descent," according to the heritage area's website.

Dardenne said the signs not only remind Louisianans of the natural beauty in the state but also alert travelers of the important ecosystem and what it has to offer tourists.

While people may have a variety of opinions on how cable television portrays Louisiana, most experts agree the publicity has a positive bottom-line effect on the state.

"TV shows like 'Swamp People' have been able to showcase this largely untouched area that a lot of people in the U.S. and around the world may not even realize still exists today," said Garret Graves, chair of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, which is under the governor's office.

De la Houssaye lived on a houseboat in the Atchafalaya Basin for nearly a decade until 1995. He said he hopes to soon leave Lake Martin's tours to again live on a houseboat in the basin. He said "Swamp People" is "the best thing that's happened to swamp tours in 10 years," and he said he's seen many more people kayaking, canoeing, bird watching and exploring the basin in the past 10 years than he ever saw while living inside the basin's levees.

"It doesn't seem to have reached a plateau," de la Houssaye said. "It's like every year I see more and more people that are using the Atchafalaya Basin in non-consumptive ways. Hunters and fishermen are consuming resources, but the large majority of the other people are non-consumptive and aren't bringing anything out of the basin except for their memories and some photographs."

In February, Dardenne traveled to New York City where, for more than a week, he, "Swamp People" cast members, Louisianans, wildlife experts and artisans promoted the state's culture and tourism opportunities during an exhibit inside the Chelsea Market.

The exhibit included a 12,100-square-foot swamp ecosystem with live alligators and other animals to help drum up excitement for the season premier of "Swamp People." The state spent $50,000 on the exhibit. The History Channel picked up the tab's remainder.

During that exhibit, Dardenne's office collected more than 11,000 email addresses from people who entered a contest to win a free trip to the Atchafalaya Basin.

"We're talking about everyone from Wall Street suits to just general visitors in New York who wanted to come see the basin," Dardenne said. "It's unique to Louisianans, and we want to make sure it's part of our outreach programs with tourism."