For More Than 30 Years, Ben Skerrett Has Worked to Maintain the Atchafalaya Basin as Both a Flood Control Device and a Haven for Area Fishermen.

Even in his 70s, Ben Skerrett is the man people will turn to for help in matters that involve the Atchafalaya Basin.

by David Kurtz
Fortune smiled on Skerrett and his group as they headed to Washington. They were seated immediately in front of Allen Ellender, the senior U.S. senator from Louisiana, on a flight that experienced numerous weather delays. By the time they disembarked, the talkative Skerrett had a meeting scheduled with Ellender for the following day. As soon as Ellender reviewed Skerrett’s photographs of the damage to the basin, he picked up the phone and ordered the Corps to have a report on his desk in three days. “Man, we were walking on air,” Skerrett recalls.

Ultimately, the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Council worked out an arrangement with the Corps whereby ring levees were built behind the spoil to prevent seepage into the swamp. It was at that time a tremendous step forward in the management of the basin and marked the first time the Corps has taken into account environmental concerns other than flood control, Campos says.

years later, when the chamber of commerce decided that it no longer needed Skerrett’s committee on waterways, the committee continued to meet and called itself the Acadiana Area Waterways Committee. The title sounds official, but the committee is not affiliated with any government agency or outside organization. It has been the vehicle Skerrett has used to get done much of his work in the basin.

It’s easy to get caught up in the factions that have been formed by the groups with interests in the basin. But Skerrett has managed to negotiate the tricky political waters of the basin and mostly avoid the polarization. Himself a recreational fisherman, who like so many others spent countless weekends introducing his children to the wonders of the basin, Skerrett has nonetheless developed lasting friendships with some of the basin’s commercial fishermen, who are frequently at odds with the recreational group.

“We could get a lot more done if we would work together,” says E.J. Daigle, 53, a fourth-generation commercial fisherman from Franklin who has worked closely with Skerrett. “The resource is there for all of us. I’m not just a commercial fisherman. On my day off, I go fishing.”

In recent years, Skerrett’s effort to bring together the different sides has been complicated by the hydrological dynamics of the basin. “Anywhere water goes, silt goes too,” explains Campos. “Silt is the enemy of the environmental values of the basin — and the flood control values too.”

Vast areas of the swamp have filled in with silt and are now dry land. Lakes that once stretched as far as the eye could see are now filled with acres of willow trees. On a recent trip into the basin, Skerrett points to a “No dredging” sign that sits landlocked among a stand of willows. The place is appropriately called Willow Cove. But that is because willows used to ring this body of water; now they have filled it. The sign used to stand 20 feet above the surface of the water, Skerrett says. Now it pokes out of the ground only a yard or so.

The most obvious solution to the siltation problem is to block water from entering the swamp, confining it to the main channel. But that creates large areas of “dead” water in the swamp. As organic material, like old trees, falls into the water, it slowly loses oxygen. And without fresh water recirculating into the area, fish life diminishes dramatically.

Such was the case in recent years in the Buffalo Cove Management Area. Bayou Eugene, which brought fresh water into Buffalo Cove, had silted up at its head. Skerrett recommended dredging the bayou, a recommendation the Corps followed last year. “The reports we have gotten are that it’s producing significant amounts of crawfish that was not available before, and that’s all Ben’s doing,” says Campos.

Similar problems have recently plagued the Grand Lake area since the Corps closed the Dog Leg Canal, the source of that area’s fresh water. The Dog Leg Canal case is a prime example of the often complicated relationship between the dual functions of the basin as a flood control device and a destination for recreational and commercial fishermen. Commercial crawfishermen from Pierre Part, on the southern end of the basin, were losing what they estimated to be several million dollars a year from low productivity in the Grand Lake Area. They approached the Corps, which in turn directed them to Skerrett, whom the Corps thought would know the details of the situation and might have a solution. As Campos notes, “He’s really able to get things done.”

All sides were concerned that reopening the Dog Leg Canal would reintroduce siltation problems into Grand Lake, which had already shrunk considerably in recent years. A group of Baton Rouge recreational fishermen strongly opposed the move, and the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, which managed much of the land in the area, was blocking it.

With the help of Daigle, Skerrett was able to get a meeting with Gov. Mike Foster earlier this year to discuss the situation. Foster was open to the idea of re-opening the Dog Leg, says Skerrett, and sent them to Jimmy Jenkins, the new sec-

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