THE Basin

New lease for Cajun coastline

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HENDERSON — Although the magnificence of the Atchafalaya Basin has touched many people, few Louisianians have totally experienced its wonders because it is so inaccessible.

The Great Flood of ’27 changed the consciousness about the great swamp, which beckoned so many but welcomed so few. South Louisiana was underwater for weeks, some areas for months. Tent cities sprang up to house the refugees as they trudged into towns such as Rayne and Broussard, on the western edge of the wilderness.

The disaster led Congress to enact flood control bills to develop the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway System. Dredging of old channels, creation of new channels and levees and shoring up the banks began in earnest. The plan was to divert the Mississippi River by channeling 1.5 million cubic feet of water per second into the Basin. Diverting Old Man River from its time-less, determined rush to the Gulf of Mexico and save parts of Acadiana and New Orleans from perennial flooding was the goal. The Atchafalaya Basin became a crucible for environmental experiments and was mutilated in the process. The largest and most inaccessible bottomland swamp in the United States began to die.

Now, after 70 years, the Atchafalaya Basin is poised for a renaissance. A partnership between eight state agencies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Congress became official last week when state and federal officials signed a memorandum of understanding that will pump new life — and $335 million — into the ailing Basin.

The renewed efforts to revitalize the area will transform the Basin into what one writer calls the outdoor equivalent of the New Orleans French Quarter.

In 1981, Gov. Dave Treen approved a state-federal partnership to preserve what is now universally considered a national treasure. The 700,000-acre wilderness caught the attention of the U.S. Park Service for possible designation as a national park, elevating it to the status of Yellowstone or the Everglades.

Taking advantage of a $250 million congressional appropriation in 1986, state officials took the initiative. Secretary Jack Caldwell of the state Department of Natural Resources says it is an experiment in state government is well under way.

“ ‘For the first time you have eight state agencies working together on one program, under the leadership of DNR,'” Caldwell said.

The Atchafalaya Basin Master Plan, running into about 150 pages, seeks to ‘re-orient human institutions toward a stewardship approach to the region’s diverse resource processes where a diversity of livelihoods will continue.”

The words of Ned Cole, author of the document, reflect his years of living close to nature. “The overriding mood of the Atchafalaya Basin will be a harmonious balance between natural and unimpaired ecological processes and the enlightened and unobtrusive use of the land for needed economic and social purposes,” he writes in the document’s preface.

Cole, 80, an architect by training and a consultant by profession, is one of the acknowledged experts on the Atchafalaya Basin. He says he was just the “scribe” when it came to crafting the plan, but the chairman of the Atchafalaya Advisory Committee, Sandra Thompson, says this is the best work he has ever done, “using only his typewriter.”

He attended more than 100 meetings and public forums throughout the state and did exhaustive research for the project. As a part of the 75-member of the Atchafalaya Advisory Committee, Cole traveled the state to design the definitive plan to ensure the Atchafalaya Basin was restored to life after years of being tinkered with.

“The Atchafalaya experience is a feeling of awe, of contentment, of lofty feelings and aspirations, and of a serenity seldom encountered in our everyday experiences,” Cole said.

The job of getting the oil and gas industry and the timber industry on board went to Thompson. She has been involved in the Basin’s preservation for more than 25 years.

Please see BASIN on Page 4A
In the '60s, Cole said efforts to save the Basin was a "mob scene," but the Treen Agreement of 1991 was negotiated between landowners and environmentalists and presented to Congress. That agreement emphasized that the Atchafalaya Basin was, first and foremost, a floodway, and that any action inconsistent with that use must be stopped. And it also exonerated property owners from liability if public access were granted.

Recreational opportunities for families will begin to just be big enough to jump on, Cole said. That any action inconsistent with the person unaccustomed to a real wilderness experience, according to Cole.

"The point of the state's Master Plan is to preserve the Basin as a wilderness area," Cole says. "As interesting as these second-hand experiences are, they do not compare with the real thing."

There has always been a tug of war in the Basin between those who want their peace and quiet and those who are promoting ecotourism or industry. But now, all the factions are pulling in the same direction, according to Ben Skerrett III, a lifelong outdoorsman and member of the Acadiana Area Waterway Committee.

"Commercial fishermen fish for fish, don't they?" he said Friday. "And sport fishermen fish for fish, right? Well, fish need good, clean water, so there's no difference between their interests."

Regarding oil exploration and timber harvesting, Skerrett notes that those pursuits have been going on for decades. But not going along with the Master Plan will be primarily for children. "One of the first things we're going to build," he said, "and it will be primarily for children."

Great snowy egret takes flight on Charenton Lake in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Caldwell recalled when his children were growing up he needed a boat to enjoy the Basin with his family. Not much bank fishing is available in the remote swamp, except for the man-made levees.

It's still largely that way today. But the state has acquired land between the rest area at Butte LaRose and Lake Pelba. A boardwalk in the area leading from the parking lot through the woods will take visitors to a long pier "constructed mostly for little kids." A bait shop that rents fishing gear will ensure a good trip for city-dwellers from Lafayette and Baton Rouge, he said.

The kicker, Caldwell says, is that the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries has agreed to dig "honey holes" filled with prime fish habitat near the pier so even the smallest angler can have a chance of catching. The Master Plan will make all this possible and the Atchafalaya Basin will no longer be the crucible for unchecked experimentation with hydrology and ecology, Cole believes.

**Basin Improvement Highlights**

- **$1.5 Million**
  - Conservation
  - Dock for boat tours
  - Bike path
  - Service bridge

- **$1.4 Million**
  - Boat launch to basin

- **$4.2 Million**
  - Interpretive center
  - Cultural center
  - Nature trails
  - Boat launch upgrades
  - Entrance station
  - Manager's residence
  - Maintenance/Storage

- **$18.7 Million**
  - AMAC center
  - Boat dock / marina
  - Developed campground
  - Campground upgrades
  - Hiking trail
  - Fishing pier / bank
  - Swimming area upgrades

**SOURCE**: Atchafalaya Basin Floodway System Louisiana Project

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