David Allemond has a dream.
The dream is 200 years old and 200 years young.
The dream is about the way the Atchafalaya Basin — still America’s largest water wonderland — used to be and the way it could be again.

The realization of this dream, he insists, is re-education.

It took 200 years of abuse to change that enormous cypress swamp into a series of lakes dotted with what photographer/naturalist/author Greg Guirard of nearby Catahoula calls in his latest work-in-progress *The Land of Dead Giants*.

Allemond, 36, is convinced that, with proper education, the great swamp will return to its former, pristine magnificence.

To that end, he helped establish last March the "Atchafalaya Basin Awareness Society." It is interesting that many of the people who helped destroy what was once a primeval paradise — the loggers who claimed the giant cypresses, the fishermen and sportmen who saw no harm in littering the watery wilderness, the oilmen who could not imagine how such a vast, watery ecological environment could be polluted etc. — will be "re-educated" by their grandchildren.

Allmond has a commercial interest in cleaning up the basin, it is true. He has a magnificent restaurant reconstructed from an old potato factory, literally at the edge of the basin’s water.

His family runs boat tours on what is left of la cypriere grande.

But when one looks into his pale, blue eyes, listens to the sincerity in his voice, one is convinced that he believes he has seriously launched a long-term effort which will eventually yield fruit that citizens of the last years of the 20th Century can hardly imagine.

"The (cypress) trees are still growing," he says with a smile that is softly, almost lovingly optimistic.

There is the problem of silting, a serious malady brought on by the good intentions of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who built levees to channel water through the Bonnet Carre Spillway to save New Orleans during the horrendous floods which has plagued Louisiana periodically since records began being kept.

But Allemond insists that the Corps is aware of the problem and eager to correct it.

Ironically, Allemond and the other members of the Atchafalaya Basin Awareness Society had "our eyes opened a little by the tourists" who journeyed so far to see the kind of naked ridiculousness engendered by Hollywood productions like *Southern Comfort* and *Shy People*.

The first Tarzan movie was filmed in the basin (near Morgan City). And the first of the famous "Curse of the Mummy" motion pictures was filmed there, too. In the latter, Hollywood pundits put a stone castle in the middle of a muddy basin that would have
swallowed it long before the mummy could have been summoned to life — and eventually a string of murders.

But when the tourists arrive at his establishment, he says with his blue eyes softening with pleasure, they forget all of that California hogwash. They see the real basin, a ghost of its former glory, and are charmed, amazed and enchanted.

“Our biggest problem is litter,” he says. And the litter comes from natives — the hunters and the fishermen and the boaters. He is quick to point out that natives who litter are doing so out of ignorance. They simply do not know what they are destroying.

He gives great credit to St. Martin Parish Sheriff Charles Fuselier Jr., who has his men regularly patrol the levees and the basin itself, collecting the trash.

The oil companies which operate in the basin “have a pretty good handle on the situation,” he says.

There have been fish kills from agricultural pesticides, he admits, but the high water from the unnatural rain of this year has kept this to a minimum.

It is clear that Allemond is emotionally involved in this endeavor. Asked how he feels when he sees a bag of trash floating near shore, he lets out a sad sigh and looks off, as though he doesn’t want to show the emotion.

“I feel like the old Indian in the commercial about trash in the mountains,” he says after a moment of composure. “His place was the mountains. Our place is the lowlands.

“This is the last great river swamp. This is something to brag about. But we have to protect it.

“The whole focus (of his nonprofit organization) is that those who come here feel like they are a part of the culture, itself. And what we need is money. The landowners have contributed. We need to lobby for this, and that means money.”

Then Allemond paused, there was a slight change in his face. He seemed to smile with a sort of strength, as though he were drawing power from the softly lapping waves at the shore of the great swamp.

“Sometimes I can see it,” he said. “Somehow I can see what was there.”

And the unspoken but unmistakable message was that he could see what would be, 200 years in the future, after he, himself, had ultimately become a part of that which he reveres.