THE LURE OF THE BASIN

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Spring has come to the BASIN once again, just as a spurt of RENEWAL and development is poised to PRESERVE the wilderness while making it more ACCESSIBLE.

Dawn breaks over the Atchafalaya Basin and Lake Bigueaux. Hundreds of cypress stumps dotting the water’s surface squat in an early morning fog that leaves the entire stretch of swamp bathed in smoke. The sky stays overcast most of the morning, but the rain that is badly needed — to restore water levels that have dropped to record lows recently — doesn’t come.

It’s a weird time in the Basin, one decidedly marked by changes. For one thing, the crawfishermen are nowhere to be seen. As with pond crawfishermen, their lifeline has been decimated by drought. The only watercraft are a scattering of bass boats, sportfishermen mostly, that slice the olive-colored water on the way to a favorite fishing hole.

The Basin, which has traditionally been a rich palette of resources — crawfish, snapping turtles, catfish, cypress timber, moss, oil — mined by Acadians for centuries, might soon yield yet another profitable reserve that will become as prevalent as any of the others ever have been. That new market is ecotourism, or nature-based tourism. “The future of tourism in this state is going to be right here in Southwest Louisiana,” says District 51 Rep. Butch Gautreaux (D, Morgan City). “We’re really excited about this. It could really put us on the map.”

Allow Gautreaux’s bias. He is the lead author of Louisiana HB114, which mandates the creation of an agency within the Department of Natural Resources that will implement and monitor the Atchafalaya Basin State Master Plan.

What’s the State Master Plan? Simply put, it is a $340 million blueprint to trade on the growing international popularity of informative, culturally and ecologically rooted tourism. Vacationers and sightseers, the thinking goes, increasingly are inclined to visit places where they can view natural settings — and learn something in the process.

“In my opinion, (ecotourism) is probably going to be the next step in allowing the visitor to really have access to and enjoyment of the Atchafalaya,” says Gerald Breaux of the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission. “Ecotourism is likely to attract types — bird watchers and naturalists and fishermen — who love the environment.”

Of course, there’s always the potential for exploitation, but there’s also the potential for increased awareness, according to state officials and environmental experts. “If it brings attention to the Basin for people other than hunters and fishermen, that’s great,” says Gary Tilyou of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

“I think this will help save the Basin from some of the things causing it to depreciate,” says University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s Jerome Agrusa. A professor with UL’s hospitality program, he has noted in the past that, “one of the best ways to protect something is to make people aware of it, so they care about it and appreciate it.”

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As the nation's largest freshwater, hardwood swamp, the Atchafalaya Basin project could, preclude many of the slew of local and state officials involved with the project, make the region another Florida Everglades.

Planned for this area are a series of improvements including boat launch face lifts, parks and boardwalks, an already under-construction museum in St. Martinville and the John J. Lynch Natural Heritage Park, a rookery (breeding ground for birds) that will occupy 115 acres of land near Henderson.

The push to bird watching, which is the growingest area of eco-tourism there is, according to Gautreaux, looks to cash in on what has become a multibillion dollar industry. With St. Martin Lake weighing in as the largest ornithological breeding ground in the world, the potential tourism-dollar rewards are incalculable. "I can't even begin to estimate what kind of dollars this will generate," notes Gautreaux. "But I can tell you the state of Louisiana is pouring $50 million into this and the return's going to be much greater than that."

By structure of the master plan, Louisiana will earmark over a period of 15 years an estimated $86 million for Basin projects, while the feds will pony up an additional $250 million in the same timeframe. "I think all this federal money will not only enhance but preserve the Basin," says District 43 Rep. Sydnie Mae Durand (D, Parks).

Keeping the Basin intact, meanwhile, is of great concern to hundreds of crawfishermen, merchants and residents who either live near the Basin or call it their office. "People won't be out in the middle of the Basin," promises Sandra Thompson, a Department of Natural Resources member who chaired the committee that engineered the plan and has been involved in Basin preservation for a quarter of a century. "Most of the Basin will stay the same."

Within the framework of Thompson's last sentence lie words some who fish in the Basin have been dying to hear. "That stuff's not gonna happen any," says Kaiser Dupuis, who's been fishing the Basin for most of his
83 years and calls this year's fishing some of the worst he's ever seen. The drought for one, he says, has crippled catfish and gaspereau production, while carp yields are healthy, but "I'm hardly selling any" because that species is used primarily as crawfish bait.

As for the tourism concerns, the fringe of the entire Basin already is hemmed with everything from restaurants and residences (a subdivision named Atchafalaya Acres sits in Butte La Rose) to hunting camps and grocery stores. Bassboats and party barges unload and dock at any number of landings and troll the waters in enormous numbers. The biggest symbol of encroachment, though, is the nearly 20-mile stretch of concrete — the I-10 bridge — that bisects the Atchafalaya. "We're already there," says Griff Blakewood, a UL renewable resources professor involved in environmental issues. "If you get people in there and aware of the problem, it would be beneficial. From what I can tell, the plan looks real good. I'm working with the people on the botanical gardens. They're trying to do it right and I know that for a fact."

A hurdle involved with any sort of Basin changes is sorting out the huge number of, and often disparate, interests. "Everyone has to buy into the idea that the change is not only necessary, but beneficial," says Koty Béguaud, a UL graduate student doing her thesis on Basin ecotourism. "More and more people are coming to the area as tourists. I don't think anyone's going to stop that. I come from a position of loving the South and want to keep that intact. What we have is unique, but it is adaptive. We're not living like Cajuns did in the 17th century."

Most of the swamp, excluding the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge and a few state-owned preserves, is held by private interests. Under guidelines of the master plan, 1,500 acres will be acquired by the state for the various projects. "It'll help a lot because it'll bring revenue into all of these little towns," says Elwood Henley, who has lived in Henderson for more than 20 years. "When I came here, there were 20 camps. Look at it now. It's a shame this is our last wilderness, but you can't stop civilization. That's progress. I'd like to see it stay the same as much as possible, but I think there's room for everybody."

There's no better way to foster an appreciation of the swamp's allure than to travel with one of the Basin's inhabitants. D. Ray Guillory — aka "Half Pint" — conducts swamp tours for visitors from Lafayette to Luxembourg. The East Texas native migrated here about 21 years ago to live on a houseboat and has commercially fished or guided tours for much of that time. "I get so excited when I see a rare bird or animal," says the colorful Guillory. "Come to think of it, I get excited when I see any animal."

Besides the more common varieties of wildlife, Half Pint, or Pint for short, claims to have caught glimpses of a wide range of scarce animals. His more exotic sightings include: Louisiana black bear (two small disconnected populations roam the Basin), black panther, bald eagle and, he swears, continued on Page 20
the crow-sized ivory-billed woodpecker, which has until recently been thought to exist only in near extinction along a secluded range of mountains in Cuba.

Guillory, who sometimes pads around the Basin barefoot and scrambles up trees to feed pieces of worm and snake to hawk hatchlings (The Times, Aug. 19, 1998), lives about as close to nature as you can. He says though odd to some, he knows and prefers no other way of life. He curses what he considers to be the slow death of the forested wetlands. "Look at that," he says, pointing to a small deer camp made of sheets of rusted tin. "They're taking over this place."

You can understand Guillory's sense of entitlement, but the Basin is emerging as a hot commodity. Everyone it seems these days, has ideas as to who should and shouldn't be there. From sportfishermen to crawfishermen, business interests to politicians, everyone wants a piece of what, no matter how you cut it, shapes up as an attractive 130-mile long by 50-mile wide pie.

But what Guillory and so many who inhabit the Basin on a daily basis resent is the disregard so many who enter the region display. "I picked up five bags of trash over there the other day during a tour," he observes, pointing to an abandoned campsite near the riverbank. "I think (tour participants) enjoyed that more than the tour."

Agrusa, for one, says the fears are not unfounded. He's studied the problems that unchecked ecotourism has spawned in places like Thailand, Hawaii and Africa. "It's the sportfishermen," says resident Henley. "They litter like crazy and have no respect for anything. I think they think 'no wake speed' means they should be asleep by the time they get home."

The ecotourism push, incidentally, isn't by far the largest project that has made people wonder about the future of the Basin. Besides the construction of the I-10 bridge, perhaps the biggest political thorn was the damming at Old River in 1963. The damming — a flood control measure so the Atchafalaya River doesn't siphon off the flow of the Mississippi and create a new course for the latter — caused quite an uproar. A New Yorker magazine-excerpted portion of John McPhee's
The Connoisseur of Nature, summed up the problem facing the U.S. Corps of Engineers: "The Atchafalaya (was) the source of water in the swamps and bayous of the Cajun world. It was the water supply of small cities and countless towns. Its upper reaches were surrounded by farms. The Corps was not in a political or moral position to kill the Atchafalaya." In essence, the Corps had to build something that would continue to direct flow from the Mississippi while preventing it from rerouting the mighty river. Then, as now, there was great concern over whether or not cataclysmic changes would decimate the Basin.

I'm not necessarily opposed to this plan," Gregg Girouard, a Catahoula native and Basin-based naturalist and photographer who has also been one of the Basin's foremost champions, has said. "I just have a lot of misgivings that the Cajun culture won't be preserved. I do not want to see (the Basin) turned into something artificial or showy. If it's done, (the Basin) needs to be kept authentic. My concern is for the crawfishermen and catfishermen. Thousands of people make their living in the Basin."

Ul professor Blakewood, who also hosts an Acadiana Open Channel program that deals with environmental issues, doesn't think such an eventuality is likely. "From what I can tell now, the only plans I've seen look good. I've seen no son of Disney approach."

Grad student Begnaud agrees, but cautions that if any segment of the population with Basin interests feels shut out of the process, they won't be cooperative and there could be adverse affects. "If the local people feel like they're being exploited, it will not be effective," she cautions. "People who have been kept out of the process feel apathetic or hostile. Those who have had a chance to voice their concerns, address their concerns, most of them feel it is beneficial."

Rep. Durand, for one, is sympathetic. "There's this pride of ownership, that's usually the way a Cajun is," she says with a laugh. "They've done it (worked in the Basin) for so long. I don't know what else to say."