

Down In The Bayou: Finding A Solution To The Wetlands Dilemma Will Not Be Easy

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This month marks the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, providing us with an opportunity to reflect on our progress since that time, in both Louisiana and elsewhere in the nation. Certainly, the city of New Orleans is safer now than it was then, with better levees among other improvements. The Big Easy has come roaring back and is growing economically in a way that it was not before the storm. A new threat, however, is looming and despite its gradual approach, its ultimate consequences will be devastating.

The coast of Louisiana has lost land mass equal to the size of Delaware since the 1930s and continues to lose land at the rate of one football field per hour. The delicate coastline is formed by sediments deposited by the Mississippi River as it meets the Gulf of Mexico, which are then rooted by vegetation growing on the sandbars. As a result of human interference and some natural causes, land loss is occurring at an alarming rate. The land, which is largely made up of marshy swampland known as the bayou, serves an important role as a natural buffer zone against storm surge. As it disappears, the state of Louisiana including its great city of New Orleans, is at risk of disappearing, too. The levees and floodwalls shoring up the city will provide a measure of protection, but more is clearly needed. Building a resilient community means learning to live with that water and this is already being done through measures such as raising houses, but it will not be enough when the water comes pouring in.

This is why the state of Louisiana has released its extensive Master Plan for the Coast to save its coastline. The 50-year, \$50 billion project is unprecedented in scale and is not yet fully funded, a task that may prove difficult in a political climate that tends toward austerity. But considering the consequences of failure, it is time to find creative approaches, involve new players, and pursue the goal in incremental phases with an eye on the goal.

A public-private approach will be necessary in order to raise the necessary funds and complete the project in a timely manner. Various industries have a stake in the outcome, as well as in the manmade causes of land loss, including shipping, fisheries, and of course, the oil and gas industries. Because the wetlands provide one-tenth of the country's natural gas and 75 percent of the nation's fish, it is essential that this plan succeeds; to forfeit these industries would be detrimental to the national economy as well as the surrounding communities. Many of the canals that have caused the erosion were created for the oil and gas industry. Industry must play a part in restoring the damage, not just financially but also through finding innovative technical approaches.

As the climate shifts, other cities can and should learn from the example of New Orleans, including coastal powerhouses like New York City and Los Angeles, which are already feeling the effects of extreme weather events being the new normal, in different ways. From hurricanes to droughts, the natural world is asserting its power and forcing a reevaluation of the idea that it can be brought to submission. Both mitigation and adaptation measures are needed and must be made a priority now. Cities will need to focus on incorporating resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity, into any future changes to the built environment. The risks cannot be controlled, but city leaders can control their reaction to it and that means reimagining communities to live with nature rather than building in spite of it.

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