

Brian Lukas: WWL-TV.... Vanishing Wetlands: Our Protection against Hurricanes



NEW ORLEANS -- Every day nature displays a thousand wonderful things under our eyes, and every day we manage to ignore them, but sometimes it gets a little tougher.

There is nothing more important to our region and our city than the wetlands and barrier islands that shield us from high winds and devastating storm surge. They are vanishing at an alarming rate.



The potential loss of almost a third of our coast is the story of our generation that receives very little attention. The environmental damage will create dire economic consequence to all of those who live and work along the coast.

After witnessing the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, a celebrated artist from south Louisiana aspired to document his culture with paint and

brush. His mission was to record his heritage on canvass before it disappears. He had assimilated fully into contemporary culture he and those of his generation long ago lost their French language, the language of their Acadian ancestors brought to South Louisiana after the expulsion from Canada generations ago.



Unfortunately, with the passage of time and the unsuspecting roadblocks that pop-up in life, his passion to paint the history of the coastal region as a legacy to future generations subsided like the marsh he desired to capture.

After decades of documenting for television the destructive affects, of even minimal tropical storms to our coast, I tried to mimic his mission. I



wanted to capture the diversity of the wildlife and the splendor of the marsh. With these images I hope to show that our wetlands are a precious commodity of abundant life.

After covering the massive devastation to our region from Hurricane Katrina and Rita, I tried to capture the images of our wetlands as "Art,"

to use these images, hopefully, to inspire the concern and awareness of our coast, to visually show the importance of our wetlands where mind-boggling statistics have not.



In these images I have tried to focus on the beauty of our wetlands rather than its destruction.

It is said that to forget your history is to forget your identity. In many areas along the coast of south Louisiana, history and identity are rapidly disappearing. The encroaching Gulf of

Mexico waters now cover large areas where once there was a history of earlier settlement. The remains of our ancestors are under water.

In the small town of Leeville, dolphins now prowl the waters for food in the shallows near the submerged cemeteries of a long ago coastal settlements. Brick grave plots are falling apart -- disappearing into the salty waters are the identities of those buried here will be lost forever.



It is as if these people had never been born. The sea has won that fight. When you ask to the elderly, who continue to live and spend their life working along the coast, "Why should anyone care about our wetlands?"

They will tell you about the loss of their culture, they will reminisce about their friends and family that have moved further inland.

They will tell you about the food and economic benefits of the coast, and they will tell you, after a long, thoughtful pause: "When our wetlands are gone, they are gone forever."

The Survivors: Louisianan Brown Pelicans

In 1999 adolescent and mature brown pelicans created a large nesting area on Curlew Island, a barrier island just off the coast of Louisiana. The widespread use of the pesticide DDT in the early 1970s decimated the brown pelican population in Louisiana. They were reintroduced to the costal acres of Louisiana by wildlife officials





species list in Louisiana. But their nesting grounds are disappearing as the barrier islands succumb to tropical storms and hurricanes.

In September 2004, Hurricane Ivan churned through the Gulf of Mexico as a category 4 hurricane. The massive storm skirted the mouth of the Mississippi River and the barrier islands of Louisiana before plowing into the beaches of Alabama and Florida beaches. Curlew Island, the nesting area for thousands of brown pelicans, vanished.

“How important it is to restore the wetlands of Louisiana? It’s our protection. It’s our Kevlar jacket against hurricanes, and the less of it there is – and there is a lot less of it than there use to be – the less protected we are. If we don’t restore those marshes, those swamps, those barrier islands south of the city, the next

time this happens, believe it or not it's going to be worse.” Glenn Pitre - Filmmaker, Writer, Director.



June 1999 - Curlew Island, Louisiana Coast.



Curlew Island with the brown Pelicans. I will tell them that I saw dolphins lunging out of



waters glisten with the deep amber sheen of the golden light reflecting in the setting sun.

I will tell them of the sharks that slowly prowled the sandy shallows. Just off the shore of the island they sought their prey. I could have touched them if I dared. I will tell my grandchildren of the thunderstorms that caressed the island this night, coming near but never touching the Island of Curlew. The brilliant lightning danced in a luminance rhythm emanating from the dark sky traveling like a crooked spoke down to the white capped waters of the Gulf of Mexico.



I will tell them of the pelicans, the thousands of brown pelicans that glide gently in the sky overhead and gracefully land on the sandy beach of Curlew. They will make this tiny barrier island their nesting ground. And I will hope that one day my grandchildren will not ask me what is a barrier island and where are the brown pelicans, as I once did.

The pelican's survival may have something in common with Louisiana's coastal communities that depend on the barrier islands for protection. Without these fragile islands, the future of both may be threatened. Brian Lukas

Brian Lukas - The Beauty of our Louisiana Wetlands



