

TO HEAR A LOT of the political rhetoric coming out of Louisiana as the BP oil disaster grinds on into summer, you might think that all we're losing in this state is money and food. It is palpably true that the livelihood of thousands of people along the Gulf Coast is at risk if not doomed indefinitely, as the seafood industry seems all but destroyed and the domestic oil industry is a shambles. But on top of this, the environment is being ruined, and there aren't a lot of politicians defending it for its own sake. That alone should say more than you want to know

about Louisiana's conflicted relationship with its environment.

On its own, the environmental destruction wrought by the Deepwater Horizon/BP accident is unbelievably significant, but Louisiana's marshes and coastlines have been diminishing at a freakishly rapid rate for the past 20 years—"one football field per day" has been the saying. If we must look merely at the cold real estate facts, a 2006 report by the Louisiana

Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force concluded that approximately four square miles of intact wetlands reduces storm surges inland by an average of one foot. But just as important, these wetlands harbor hundreds of wildlife species such as brown pelicans and marsh birds that are found in few other places. That report also pointed out that coastal

Louisiana lies directly beneath the Mississippi Flyway, the seasonal travel route of more than 3.5 million migratory waterfowl, and its wetlands and coastal ridges act as stopover habitat for millions of neotropical migratory birds on their journeys across the Gulf of Mexico. Anyone unimpressed

by the sheer environmental impact should know that Louisiana pulls up 36 percent of the nation's shrimp, half its oysters, a quarter of its blue crabs, and one-third (by weight) of the fish we eat in the lower 48, according to the Wetlands Task Force. Forty thousand jobs depend on one thing: a healthy web of life.

In terms of carts and horses, though, the official reaction to the oil leak in Louisiana must seem confused to the rest of the country. The political priority has been on lifting the Obama administration's moratorium on drilling in the gulf and hammering on concerns about losing jobs and the revenue streams from deepwater oil drilling. The problem is that the environment and the economy are so closely tied in Louisiana that it is almost impossible to talk about one without the other.

This relationship runs deep. Since the leak began, fishermen from Louisiana have talked about the integral part that both fishing and oil have played in their families' livelihoods for generations. One generation might work as fishermen, the next might work on the oil rigs, and the next might return to fishing. The environment in Louisiana does not exclude oil. It embraces it. Those fishermen often talk about finding some of the best hauls around the oil rigs. The rigs act as artificial reefs, and there are even web sites that help sport fishermen locate the rigs. Festivals such as the Oilfield Crawfish Boil-Off at Fort Jackson and the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival in Morgan City celebrate both oil and seafood together.

When I climb up the levee at the end of my block in Jefferson Parish, I see the Huey P. Long Bridge (named for a politician who pushed hard for offshore drilling in the first place), the wide and beautiful Mississippi River, several barges tied up or passing through, egrets, terns, storage tanks, warehouses, manufacturing plants, turtles, and towboats. It's the mixture that makes it unique. It's also what has caused incoherent responses to the oil leak. For years, the oil industry's impact on the wetlands—cutting openings through *(Continued on Page 150)*



SPORTSMAN'S PARADOX

Ecology goes begging in Louisiana's marriage of fishing and oil drilling.

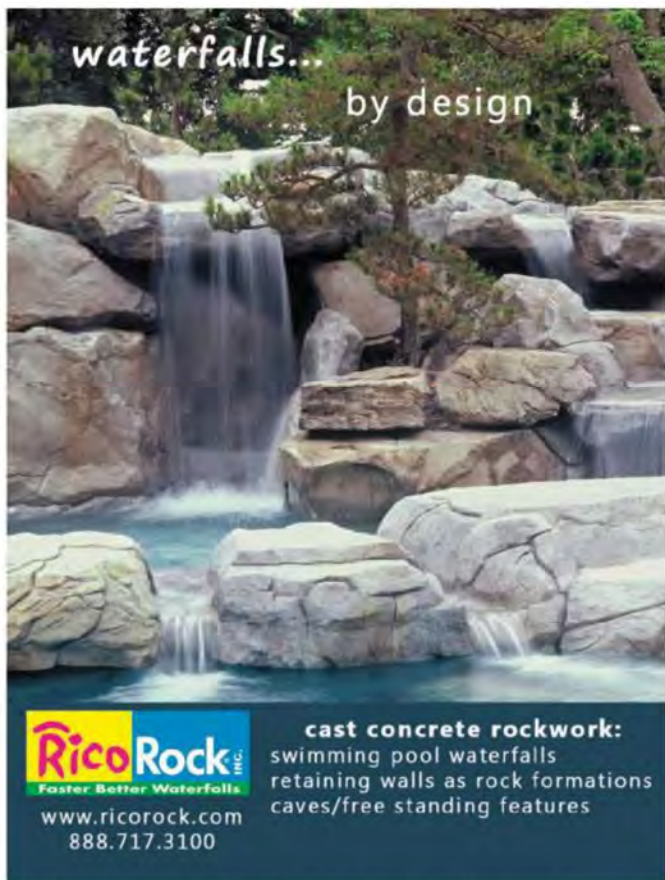
By Alexandra Stroud

(Continued from Page 152) marshes for boats and tearing up complex ecologies—has been accepted as part of doing business. Other states have fought the threat of offshore oil drilling, but Louisiana has allowed it for years, and without receiving the kinds of royalties that other states have negotiated. Yet oil still generates tons of money down here: 16 times the revenue of fishing, as Eric Smith, a professor at Tulane University's Energy Institute, recently told National Public Radio. "It dwarfs everything," he said.

This economic reality is why Governor Bobby Jindal wrote a letter on June 2 to President Obama asking his administration to lift the offshore drilling moratorium. It's why Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser, in the first few days after the leak began, praised BP's response but has since altered his tone as he sees what is happening to his parish's coastline. It's why Representative Anh Cao can in one breath invoke our "already-fragile wetlands" and

the destruction of the coast and in another say that he'd like to speed up the timetable for sharing royalties among the states from offshore oil drilling. It's also why front-page editorials in the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans on May 28 and on June 4 tried to remind the president, who was coming to visit, that the six-month moratorium puts 20,000 jobs at stake. The newspaper also asked the president for Louisiana's fair share of oil-related revenues.

Louisiana's drilling provides 30 percent of the nation's oil supply, and the state's economy utterly depends on it—to the point that even environmentalists are conflicted. Beth Galante, the local director for Global Green, laments the "cozy relationship between our elected officials and this [oil] industry." But Galante had to take pains to note that the oil leak represents "a wrenching and frightening transformation" while asking that the rest of the country pay Louisiana back for its current sacrifice. "It is sad to admit," she says, "but we Louisianans



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are simply not economically or politically strong enough to lead our nation out of its servitude to dirty energy.”

When it comes to protecting the environment, though, Louisiana’s priorities are hardly pure. Jindal and Nungesser have been pushing for a six-foot-high sand berm to protect the area around Grand Isle and the barrier islands. And they have asked and received approval for BP to pay for it. Many environmental researchers, such as Denise J. Reed, a wetlands expert and the interim director of the Pontchartrain Institute for Environmental Sciences at the University of New Orleans, believe that the berm may work in the short term but will likely wash out to sea with the first big storm.

We’ve had years to figure out ways to protect the wetlands but haven’t done so. Before the oil’s eruption, Louisiana had been losing 40 square miles of marsh a year for several decades, the Wetlands Task Force estimates, which amounts to 80 percent of the nation’s annual coastal wetland loss. At

that rate, the state could lose 800,000 more acres of wetlands by 2040, and the shoreline will have moved inland by as much as 33 miles. And now here we are, scrambling for ways to keep the oil off the beaches.

Louisiana has issues to confront on an epic scale in the coming months. Among the first should be protecting the wetlands as a natural asset in their own right. At the moment, Louisiana is not prepared to do that. These intricate natural systems need an honest broker to be their unambiguous guardian, if there happens to be anything left to guard when this crisis is over.

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