

Atchafalaya River Basin Initiative

Restoring America's Great Swamp Forest
Restoration | Science | Community

The Place

The Atchafalaya River Basin teems with life. Across a million acres, bald eagles and swallow-tailed kites soar overhead, while very rare Louisiana black bears prowl the forests and American alligators patrol the river banks. The basin's deep woods, fertile marshes, and meandering waters provide essential habitat for more than 300 species of wildlife and 100 different aquatic species, as well as a rich diversity of native plants. Together, these lush habitats power the livelihoods and recreational activities that shape the region's history, culture, and heritage.

The impact of the Atchafalaya River Basin also reaches far beyond its banks. Water from 31 states and two Canadian provinces drains into the river, making it an important distributary for the entire country. And as the Atchafalaya helps move water from north to south, it provides the lifeblood of the Gulf. The river's influx of fresh water to the coast creates the unique wetland habitats that oysters and other aquatic species need to thrive and delivers sediment that's growing deltas in Atchafalaya Bay and Wax Lake, the only places along the Louisiana coast that are gaining ground.



AUDRA MELTON/TNC



KEITH OUCHLEY, THE STATE DIRECTOR

To be here deep in the Atchafalaya is to be in a cathedral of majestic trees. There is peace and quiet except for the sounds of nature and you can hear the birds, the wind, the water. It's magical to get back into some of these lonely little bayous and feel like you're stepping back in time. The Atchafalaya is a true national treasure. There's a way of life out here and a culture and a knowledge that are so important to preservation. We want to tap into that, and couple that with science to preserve and restore this great landscape. It's so important to me that we get this right.



JIM BERGAN, THE CONSERVATIONIST

The Atchafalaya is truly unique. It's a spectacular, globally important wilderness, and a spectacular community of people. But we also need to understand that the Atchafalaya is a working landscape where fish, gators, and crawfish are captured and sold on the world market. One of the great things about The Nature Conservancy and how we do conservation is that we try to immerse ourselves into the local communities in which we work. These communities don't need computer models. They don't need degrees after their name to be able to tell us that there's some real issues out here in the Atchafalaya that they're really wanting The Nature Conservancy to help them with. What we want to do is to try to make this a more sustainable system for the communities and the people that enjoy the Atchafalaya, and to do that in partnership with the people, communities, private landowners, state agencies, federal agencies, corporations, and foundations working together to meet the challenge and make a difference here in the Atchafalaya.

The Challenge

As part of the world's third largest river basin, the Atchafalaya is used heavily for shipping and industry. Man-made locks, canals, levees, and water control structures that were created to control flooding, extract timber and mineral resources, and move ships and other vessels to and from the river have changed the way the river flows.

As a result, the Great Swamp Forest that surrounds the river has suffered. In some places, water flows the wrong way, causing flooding that hurts the forests. Still other places suffer from too much or too little sediment delivered from the Atchafalaya River. The lack of water hurts the aquatic species so many rely on to make their living. These problems with the "plumbing system" in the Atchafalaya have cost both people and nature.

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GWEN ROLAND, THE AUTHOR

Life out here is all about the water. It always has been. It's absolutely everything. If you stop the water, you stop the life. I would love to see as much of the Atchafalaya as possible restored to free-flowing water as it was back when there was a real community out here, because when the wildlife and the fish have water coming and bringing it to life, then the people have a life too.



JOHNNY MILLER, THE LANDOWNER

I'm blessed. I have a place to go that I can get away from everything, the stresses of work, the stresses of life, because when I get in that boat and I come here, they're gone. Some people go to the golf course, some people go to the gym, I come here. This is where I'm at peace with everything and everybody. I'm always up to the task of looking for change that's going to be good, whether it's for human beings or whether it's for the land. If The Nature Conservancy can do things to restore fresh water into places where the water's dead well I'm all for it. That'd be a good thing.



The Solution

To address this challenge head on, The Nature Conservancy purchased 5,359 acres in the Bayou Sorrel region of the Atchafalaya River Basin. The acquisition marks the first step in a long-term vision to conserve and restore America's Great Swamp Forest. We are employing three strategies to realize our vision for the river basin:

Restoration

Drawing on more than 60 years of experience and proven results, we will work to restore habitat for fish, wildlife, and other species that rely on the basin's myriad habitats for survival. A large part of these efforts will include restoring natural water flows for the benefit of both people and nature.

Science

At The Nature Conservancy, science is at the heart of who we are and what we do. We will use science as a guide for our restoration efforts, learning as we go to ensure the long-term health of this important place. Scientific monitoring and testing will allow us to understand the current health of the basin, how it responds to restoration efforts, and how it can play a role in mitigating other environmental threats, such as the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

Community

The Atchafalaya River Basin is the place where people have connected to nature for generations. Through our work, we seek to strengthen, elevate and sustain the community's efforts to conserve this natural resource by working directly with local stakeholders. We are also developing a research and education center that will serve as a convening space where we can educate others about the importance of the river basin to Louisiana, the Gulf of Mexico, the entire country, and the world.

AUDRA MELTON/TNC



JOE BAUSTIAN, THE WETLAND ECOLOGIST

My entire life I've been enamored by the Mississippi River and how it is connected to its tributaries and distributaries, like the Atchafalaya. As I got older I realized how important the system was ecologically, and I've seen first-hand how hydrologic manipulations by man can have a negative impact on the environment. Ten years from now I hope people look back on our early restoration efforts and see it as the first step toward improving the ecological functioning of the Basin. We want to show people a way forward, which we hope will spur additional restoration efforts throughout the Basin.



CALVIN VOISIN, THE PIONEER

I just like being around the water. That's why I built my house right there on the edge of the bayou. I can sit on the porch and watch the water, watch the boats pass. It's just a calming feeling I guess, being that close to the water.



AUDRA MELTON/TNC

The Preserve

As part of this initiative, the property purchase in the Bayou Sorrel region will become the Atchafalaya Basin Preserve. The property will be maintained as one of 16 nature preserves The Nature Conservancy manages statewide. The preserve will be open to the public through managed visitation, field days and volunteer events. A preserve headquarters and learning center (mentioned above) will be established for the preserve. Restoration of preserve and adjacent state land tracts will occur in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources-Atchafalaya Basin Program.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN

- Atchafalaya River Basin
- Atchafalaya Basin Preserve Land Tracts

• Lake Charles Lafayette • • Baton Rouge • New Orleans

ATCHAFALAYA BASIN PRESERVE

Atchafalaya Basin Preserve Land Tracts

Lake Fausse Pointe State Park Attakapas Island Wildlife Management Area

ATCHAFALAYA RIVER BASIN

The Atchafalaya River Basin is the largest bottomland, hardwood forest swamp left in North America, and in many ways it's the kidneys of the Mississippi River. Thirty percent of the Mississippi's water flows through here and is filtered and cleaned before heading to the Gulf of Mexico.

The size and scale of the Basin make it uniquely important to Louisiana and the entire country. The Basin's natural services such as flood control, carbon storage, navigation, oil and gas resources, forest, fish and wildlife resources, and nutrient reduction are valued at billions of dollars annually. We can restore the hydrology here and improve the health of the river for the wildlife and people that depend on this amazing place.



C.C. LOCKWOOD, THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I think we're smart enough as a nation to save areas like this. We've monkeyed it up with a lot of pipeline canals and spoil banks, you know, and we need to bring it back. The Atchafalaya is necessary for flood control, for recreation, for cleaning the waters that come down from 2/3 of the United States. It's something that I think we're going to save, and I'm behind that all the way.



BOB CARLINE, THE HISTORIAN

The Nature Conservancy is not going to be a miracle worker, but anything you do is better than nothing. You know, back in the old days, during the steamboat days, they worked with what Mother Nature gave them. Mother Nature says "I'm going to give you water six, seven, eight months out of the year. The other three months out of the year, you can't run commerce on steamboats." The people here worked with what Mother Nature gave them. We're a 24/7-type operation now so what do we do. The Corps says "we'll help, we'll dredge, we'll try to keep the channels open." So, that's where we are today. We can't depend on Mother Nature now to repair itself.

The Partners

We are committed to working with partners on the local, state, and national level to achieve this vision for the basin. Our partners on this initiative include Shell Oil Company, North American Wetlands Conservation Council, Louisiana Department of Natural Resources-Atchafalaya Basin Program, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, M.W. Murphy Foundation, The Frost Foundation, Charles Lamar Family Foundation, and A. Wilbert's Sons LLC.

The Benefit

By working to restore America's Great Swamp Forest, we protect habitat for hundreds of species, including 17 species of concern. We safeguard the culture and livelihood of thousands who live in the region. We conserve trees that are extremely resilient to hurricanes, thus protecting Louisianans from storms. And we ensure that this incredible wild place is preserved and protected for generations to come.

Join Us

In this place where fresh and saltwater meet, we find some of the most unique wildlife and habitats in the world, as well as the heartbeat of Cajun culture. Our purchase in Bayou Sorrel was the first step in restoring America's Great Swamp Forest, but so much work remains to be done. Now is the time to give back to a natural resource that gives so much to us. Donate to the Atchafalaya River Basin Initiative today.

AUDRA MELTON/TNC



DON HAYDEL, THE STATE SCIENTIST

160 years ago the Basin was a pristine forest of old growth cypress. Then man came along and changed the flow of the river, harvested the trees, and made changes to the hydrology. As time progresses there's less and less opportunity to preserve what's left. We're at one of those crossroads now where it's really important that we do what we can, right now, to find partners and to preserve as much of this as we can.



BRYAN PIAZZA, THE SCIENTIST

The Atchafalaya is conservation. When I talk about preserving this place with my kids I talk about the importance of teamwork, living our beliefs, and putting things that I believe in very strongly on the ground to be here long after I'm gone. The Atchafalaya is a magical place and I see it every time we bring somebody here. It's not just important ecologically and it's not just important for flood control. There's a magic to this place.



The Nature Conservancy 

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