THE HUMAN CHARACTER OF LOUISIANA'S COASTAL LOWLANDS THROUGH THE EYES OF A COLONIAL HISTORIAN AND A CULTURAL GEOGRAPHER

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Louisiana's alluvial wetlands have traditionally been studied almost exclusively for their distinctive flora and fauna. Indeed, books, monographs, and a sizable body of research material have been published on marsh, estuarine, terrestrial, aquatic, and avian species, but little has been written about the people who live within this coastal area that is about the size of Maryland with a habitable land mass equal to Connecticut. This is a region that is not only continuously at risk from hurricanes, but is also threatened by ongoing subsidence, progressive shoreline erosion, and unexpected high-water events. Yet, the region's human landscape is at best an afterthought for administrators making long-term decisions.

The forgotten marshdwellers are nevertheless internationally significant because of their unwavering resolve to survive in this "threatened" environment. Their cultural foundation, a result of nearly ten generations of environmental adaptation, has informed their responses to hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike, and Irene, as well as the BP oil disaster and the 2011 high water event on the Mississippi River. Each of these catastrophes has evoked detailed governmental risk assessments and recommendations made, unfortunately, without local input. It is thus hardly surprising that they have not been favorably received.

The fundamental problem is that many planners do not understand the culture, values, and psyche of the marshdwellers, who, within living memory, have survived numerous catastrophic events—survived them quite well—without any external assistance. For them, government- ordered retreat from their native wetlands is tantamount to cultural suicide. Stakeholder engagement is easy, provided the policy-making community takes the time to visit, talk, and listen. Listening is the key. There is room for considerable improvement to the current system that effectively fosters a one-sided dialogue favoring detached planners. However, utilization of existing infrastructures—particularly the extensive network of Sea Grant agents—as information pipelines to decision-makers willing to utilize natives' expertise and heed their advice holds the promise of creating a more level playing field and fostering a more equitable discourse.

To increase the visibility of social scientists, Louisiana Sea Grant has partnered with the University Press of Mississippi to encourage publication of a board spectrum of humanities and behavioral science materials that are, for the first time, readily accessible to a general readership and, hopefully, decision- makers. The new Third Coast Series, which does not exclude the so-called "hard" sciences, is seeking new, original, and manuscripts written about the region's human landscape. Manuscripts should average about 20,000 words, complemented by engravings, maps, and other printed matter.