

WATER MARKS

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Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration News

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Education, recreation and
volunteer service in restored wetlands

Coastal Louisiana: Classroom and Playground

BUILDING COMMUNITY BEYOND THE MARSH BOUNDARIES

Volunteers Augment Restoration's Success

Why would anyone travel hundreds of miles at their own expense, risk the bites of hordes of mosquitoes and spend days in back-breaking work without pay? "The draw of our first trip was to help clean up after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill," says Larissa Graham, Long Island Sound outreach coordinator for New York Sea Grant. Working with the president of the New York State Marine Education Association, Graham organized a trip that brought marine educators

from New York to Louisiana for a week of volunteer service. "Once here, we realized that Louisiana faced a threat greater than the oil spill. Habitat loss is the bigger, older environmental story unfolding in Louisiana. Knowing that stronger, healthier ecosystems rebound from disasters more quickly, the focus of our trip rapidly became coastal restoration."

But why travel to Louisiana if the place you live has threatened wetlands of its own? "Louisiana's plight is

instructive to people working on wetland issues in New York," says Graham. "We are experiencing many of the same problems, but not to Louisiana's extreme. Not only does Louisiana show us the perils of wetland decline and loss, it also is modeling solutions. Our trips have inspired participants to undertake stewardship projects in our own wetlands."

While Louisiana may be an exotic destination for people from New England or England, from the Pacific Northwest or the Netherlands, for many volunteers it's their

To fulfill its mission to protect and restore a sustainable coast, the non-profit organization Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL) conducts volunteer projects in the wetlands year-round. Additionally, the group increases public awareness about coastal issues through conferences and a coastal stewardship awards program.





own backyard. “Locals have watched the wetlands disappear for years,” says Matt Benoit, plant materials coordinator for the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP). “They understand what’s happening and want to do something about it. Whether they are planting marsh vegetation or protecting bird nesting sites, from an environmental standpoint, their work absolutely makes a difference. We revisit many areas year after year to show volunteers how fish and bird habitats have increased in restored areas. The results of their work are visible.”

Cultivating coastal advocates

“We place a lot of emphasis on making sure volunteers have a high quality experience,” says Hilary Collis, restoration coordinator for the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL). Founded in 1988, CRCL uses volunteer activities to educate communities across the coast and throughout the nation about the coastal restoration pro-

cess. “Getting citizens out to see what’s happening in the wetlands is the best way to promote an understanding of the coast’s role in the nation’s environment, economy and culture. We watch people change. New volunteers especially are excited to be engaged and actually doing something to help the coastal ecology.”

“Volunteer projects give people a chance to work in an environment many have never experienced before,” says Benoit. “It’s not easy to see the marsh, so providing access gives us an opportunity to educate visitors about the importance of this fragile ecosystem, how projects are helping to restore it, and how their tax dollars make the projects possible.”

Benoit says volunteering encourages citizen participation and fosters stewardship. “At first people are often tentative to get their shoes dirty, but by the end of the day they are wallowing in the mud and thankful for the experience.

“I think the most fascinating aspect of community outreach is that it becomes a chain of knowledge that can extend in endless directions. Children are wonderful couriers of information. If I am able to pique their interest on a topic, they will probably go home and tell their parents about it, who may then tell their families, coworkers and friends ...”

Jessica Schexnayder, LSU Sea Grant

They go home and tell their friends about what Louisiana is experiencing and why it’s important to save the wetlands. They’ve lived it, done it, helped out – so they become flag-bearers for coastal restoration.”

Partners for CWPPRA project sites

Like CRCL, BTNEP incorporates an educational component into all of their projects. “Volunteers learn why the tasks we undertake – propagating plants, replanting native vegetation, removing invasive species, clearing trails, cleaning up trash – are vital to successful restoration,” says Benoit. “Working on site, they recognize the importance of Louisiana’s coastal environment – how the wetlands provide protection from storms, how fisheries rely on marsh habitat and how native vegetation sustains the wetlands’ ecological health and resiliency.”

Teams often work at CWPPRA sites. For example, at the North Lake Mechant Landbridge Restoration project, BTNEP volunteers planted smooth cordgrass to shield interior marshes from erosion and saltwater intrusion. Plant-

ing cordgrass strengthened shoreline protection measures at the CWPPRA project site in Little Lake, and plantings at West Lake Boudreaux accelerated stabilization of new, emergent marsh. Volunteers have also planted sites where vegetation failed to take root naturally or where restoration funding allocated no money for planting.

After Graham's group of New York marine educators assisted at nurseries harvesting seeds, propagating plants and potting sprouts, BTNEP took them out to project sites to install plants. "It was a great way to see various steps in the restoration process and to experience how different partners work together," Graham says. Her team was most inspired by the dedication, motivation and enthusiasm of the people working in Louisiana. "It takes special people to tackle so big a problem. Often

people ignore environmental issues because they don't know how to deal with big problems, but even little steps make a difference."

New champions for restoring Louisiana's coast

"From a big-picture environmental standpoint, what a volunteer accomplishes is a drop in the bucket," says Diane Huhn, volunteer coordinator for Bayou Grace Community Services. "While it's true that every drop is critical in filling that bucket, our program's greatest value is transforming an academic interest in saving the environment into a personal commitment to save the treasure that is coastal Louisiana."

Based in Terrebonne Parish, Bayou Grace provides education, housing and hospitality and introduces Louisiana's people, food and cultural



Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

A single sapling or plug of cordgrass, a grain of sand, an hour of a volunteer's time – none alone can staunch Louisiana's wetland loss. But multiplied by hundreds and thousands, a stand of cypress takes root, grasses secure acres of wetland soil, sand rises into dunes, and volunteer service brings hope to coastal restoration.

traditions to volunteers coming from across the country and around the world. "Most teams are organized through a school, a church or an environmental club," says Huhn. "Typically staying for about a week, they witness the impact of land loss on the environment, the community and the country. When they realize coastal Louisiana's contribution to the nation – its importance to the oil and gas industry, its fisheries, its amazing culture and heritage – they begin to understand how we're all connected; how, if the nation is going to be healthy, we have to take care of the entire country. People go home as coastal advocates, determined to increase awareness and educate others about Louisiana's problems and their responsibility to ensure the survival of its coast." WM



Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program

In some restored areas, natural colonization provides rapid vegetative protection; other sites need the jump-start of hand-planted seedlings. Volunteers frequently undertake the labor-intensive task of setting out plants in the marsh.