

Louisiana Coastal Wetlands and Louisiana Coastal Grey Literature: Vanishing Treasures

Gina R. Costello

Special Collections Library, Louisiana State University, United States

Abstract

Over the last century Louisiana has lost an alarming amount of coastal wetlands to coastal erosion. Natural disasters and manmade solutions to problems alike have contributed to this national tragedy. A vast amount of grey literature documenting the history of land loss in Louisiana has been produced, but never collocated for researchers' use. The Louisiana Coastal Grey Literature Project endeavored to locate, organize and provide access to these valuable hidden treasures.

Introduction

Since 1932, when the Department of Natural Resources began keeping thorough, accurate records, Louisiana has lost over 1,900 square miles or 1.2 million acres of coastal land due to coastal erosion. This translates into an area roughly the size of the state of Delaware. The current rate of land loss in Louisiana is a little over 10 square miles per year¹. These staggering statistics are important to Louisianans and to every U.S. citizen because of the impact this land loss and its subsequent repercussions have on the region and the country.

These statistics lead the Louisiana Governor's Office of Coastal Activities (GOCA) to seek assistance in preserving the important data compiled about Louisiana's land loss over the past 70 years. In October 2004 GOCA and Louisiana State University (LSU) Libraries began an ambitious project to identify, collect, preserve, and provide access to grey literature research relating to the state's battle against coastal land loss. The goal of the Louisiana Coastal Grey Literature Project was to promote the availability of this information as an environmental awareness resource for state and federal agencies, university researchers and the public.

This paper offers a brief background history of the land loss in Louisiana and its causes, information describing the Louisiana Coastal Grey Literature project and its purpose, and a description of the methods that were used to identify grey literature for the project database. Information about the survey designed to assess the needs of potential database users, the creation of the database, and decisions about metadata and organization follow. In conclusion the author offers a summary of the lessons learned and what work still remains to be completed.

Historical Background

Louisiana, which is located in the southern U.S., has historically been a state that is vulnerable to the warm hurricane-prone waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the powerful, capricious flow of the Mississippi River. Early settlers to the land were attracted to coastal and river areas because of the wealth of resources available in and near the water. To live safely in these regions, though, people had to work to control river waters that threatened to flood their land or periodically alter course and change the landscape. Although containment of water flowing in and around Louisiana was necessary for individuals to be able to live and work in the area, it has forever altered the geography of the region and led to a national crisis that could mean the end for an already fragile ecosystem.

The mighty Mississippi River, which extends from Minnesota to Louisiana where it spills into the Gulf of Mexico, became a transportation and trade route in 1705 when the first boat of cargo travelled down the river². Many people settled in the regions around the Mississippi River and cities such as St. Louis, Missouri, Memphis, Tennessee, and New Orleans, Louisiana sprang up.

Tragic floods that devastated these highly populated areas required the construction of levee systems along the banks of the Mississippi³. These levees, which are manmade earthen mounds reinforced by other materials and located on both sides of the river, have saved countless lives and contained a dangerous river that became an important north to south navigation route. However, taming the river has come at a great cost to the wetlands and coastal regions of this area. Naturally occurring wetlands that are home to hundreds of species of birds and wildlife were sustained by the sediment brought by flood waters of the Mississippi.

Manmade levees were not the only cause for the deterioration of this area; the Gulf of Mexico offshore oil and gas industries, which rank numbers one and two respectively in U.S. production⁴, brought many changes that drastically affected the landscape. In the early twentieth century the growing oil industry

¹ Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (2006), "Louisiana coastal facts," <http://dnr.louisiana.gov/crm/coastalfacts.asp>.

² U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (2004), "The Mississippi River and tributaries project," <http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/pao/bro/misstrib.htm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (2006), "Louisiana coastal facts," <http://dnr.louisiana.gov/crm/coastalfacts.asp>.