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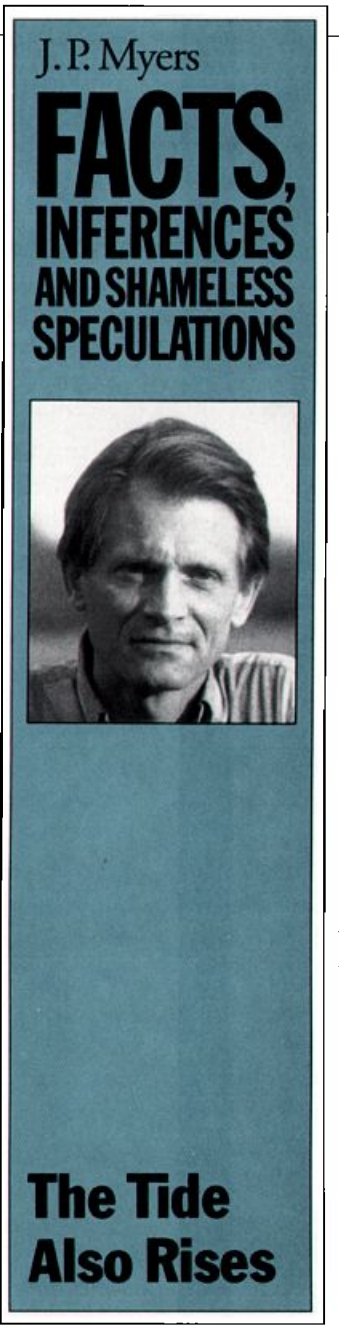

COASTAL LOUISIANA is in trouble. It needs more mud. It needs fewer levees, canals, and toxic chemicals. It needs better science and ecosystem management. And it needs all this now, or we will lose one of the great wetlands of this hemisphere.

Mind you, I write this having had a very close, personal, and painful relationship with Louisiana mud—I lost a truck to the rising tide in Cameron Parish, not too far from the Texas border. But I am willing to let that pass. The tide is rising on Louisiana's entire coastal ecosystem, and it demands national attention.

Now my truck, well, it was the first truck I'd ever been able to buy on a grant, and I'd owned it for all of four days, little more than the time it took to drive from Philadelphia to Holly Beach. But it wasn't really very much in the grand scheme of things.

Louisiana's coastal wetlands, on the other hand, are an extraordinary natural resource. They have yielded immense mineral wealth from ecosystems past—oil and gas. They have fed generations of humans and wildlife with fisheries whose bounty depends upon wetland nurseries. They buffer New Orleans and Baton Rouge and Lafayette from storm surges and the full brunt of hurricane winds. They figure centrally in bird migration systems that collectively span the New World—waterfowl, shorebirds, and even passerines, which depend upon the coastal uplands of Louisiana for landfall after passing over the Gulf of Mexico.

There are not many places on the continent where human and ecosystem requirements are more conspicously congruent. This shared interest should mean that here, perhaps more than in any other region of the country and for more than any other conservation issue, the many forces that play in battles over environmental protection should find common ground.

The simple fact is that humans and nature alike need a Louisiana coastal ecosystem that works. And it won't work, indeed it will disappear, if we stick with business as usual.

Louisiana's problem, quite simply, is that marsh is being lost to the sea at the rate of some 50 sq miles per year—almost one Washington, D.C., annually (which, come to think of it, some people might wildly applaud). And the rate of loss is growing dramatically. On top of that add toxic contamination, from both industrial and agricultural activities, which has converted Louisiana's lower Mississippi corridor into "Cancer Alley," as well as one of the best places in the country to see and smell large numbers of dead fish. All this makes for a large and immediate threat.

A natural marsh lives in a balance struck between changes in sea level and changes in land height. For a coastal wetland to persist, sediment—created locally by decomposing plants, or washed down river from upstream

sources by flooding—must accumulate faster than the ground subsides or the seas rise.

That's no longer happening in coastal Louisiana. Several factors are driving the sea inland. Foremost is the Army Corps of Engineer's massive plumbing job applied to the Mississippi for flood control and to facilitate river transportation. River sediment used to flush out over the coastal marshes in periodic floods. It would settle and keep the marshes building soil. Most of that sediment—several hundred million tons each year—instead now passes directly into the Gulf of Mexico.

Oil and gas extraction add their impacts, also. Decades of pumping have led to local land subsidence, and worse, have required construction of some ten thousand miles of canals in the coastal zone. These waterways make it that much easier for saltwater to move inland, killing salt-sensitive vegetation that helps stabilize the marsh. This creates more openings for even more erosion. A positive feedback loop kicks in: more saltwater means less vegetation means more erosion means the sea inches further northward toward New Orleans. Global warming will accelerate this process: Water expands as it warms, and when the ocean expands, it rises.

So that's the problem. But there's more, and it involves money and politics. I can't help but think about my truck, back there in Cameron Parish, the Gulf rising above its dashboard. I didn't have the tools to get it out by myself. Nor was I fully prepared for the reality of local politics, which seemed more interested in milking my insurance company than in helping some northern boy who'd gotten his truck bogged out in Johnson's Bayou. I wasn't even ready for the restaurant sign that said: "Cheeseburger, $1.15. With Cheese, $1.35."

Fixing Louisiana's hemorrhage will cost more than the price of a cheeseburger, even one with Brie. The estimates in fact are not that daunting—some $1 billion to $2 billion over a fifty year period, and appropriations already are poised to flow from Congress to the tune of $35 million per year (with the state providing a $10–15 million match). Intelligent reallocation of the Army Corp's current budget—away from perpetuating the problem and toward fixing it—will add substantially to this sum. The Army Corps now spends some $300 million a year to maintain the current system, which its own experts acknowledge is not sustainable, even for its intended, narrow purpose.

But with this much new money flowing toward coastal Louisiana, the issue and the marshes risk getting lost in the struggle for pork. Far-sighted efforts to develop and implement functional, long-term restoration and management—led by the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana—must do daily battle with projects whose main impacts are more likely to line pockets than to build marsh.

Two benchmarks appear on the horizon: The first comes this fall, when the agencies involved must deliver to Congress a comprehensive plan that shows what they will do and why it will work. The second is then set for next year, when it will be time to reauthorize federal support. Both these benchmarks offer good opportunities to ask focused questions about whether taxpayer dollars are doing what they need to do.

Put this issue in a larger context. As a nation we spent the last campaign season debating how the economy and the environment were linked. We now have an Administration bent on making them work together. We face a series of what Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt describes as trainwrecks, where the old paradigm pitting environment against economics still holds sway.

No other natural resource issue at play today makes a clearer, more inclusive connection between the economic well-being of a community and the ecological health of a regional ecosystem. The range of constituencies with something at stake and common interests is extraordinary, which means that it can have equally wondrous power.

Birders, shrimpers, working people within the coastal zone, tourists, public health advocates, suburbanites on the south side of New Orleans, wetland scientists, fourteen different stripes of environmentalist, hunters, trappers, real estate agents in Holly Beach, property owners on the Delta—all these people have deep interest in seeing the marshes of coastal Lousiana restored to ecological health. It's a coalition unlike any other that has formed around environmental protection, and it can win.

I only lost a truck. We can't afford to lose the marsh.

—J.P. Myers is Director of the W. Alton Jones Foundation.

Willets use coastal Louisiana wetlands. Photograph/Arthur Morris/VIREO