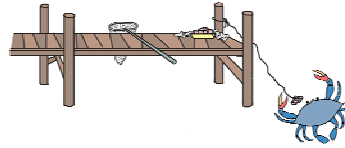




Crab Lines



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Dear Friends of BTNEP,

I want to share with you the following essay by Mr. Tom Ardito. Tom works for one of our sister National Estuary Programs, the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program in Rhode Island. The Barataria Terrebonne National Estuary Program shares a common bond with the 28 National Estuary Programs. Each of us created restoration plans that were tailored to meet the needs of our specific regions. Most importantly the people of the region including scientists, industrial representatives, agricultural interests, educators, and representatives of our federal, state and local governments developed each of these plans.

The fact that Tom took time to begin his essay with a description of the “trials” of an area outside of his own is a testament to strong bond that the NEPs share. The BTNEP is fortunate to be part of this strong network of National Estuary Programs.

Each of the plans developed by the NEPs, called Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans (the CCMP), is different because each addresses the issues of a particular national estuary, but they are all built on the premise that successful restoration on a watershed level must start from a point where most can agree on what needs to be done to fix the problem.

To restore an area as ecologically and sociologically complex as Barataria Terrebonne we must start with defining what we mean by restoration and finding the point of agreement among our people of what is important to us and what needs to be preserved. That is what the BTNEP partnership did over 10 years ago. Planning needs to now move to IMPLEMENTATION.

We don't have time to argue about how to address our issues any longer, so let's all push for implementation of the CCMP.

Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kerry M. St. Pé'.

Kerry St. Pé

Bringing Coastal Restoration Back Home

By THOMAS ARDITO

A COUPLE of thousand miles south of its headwaters in Minnesota, the Mississippi River takes a big, lazy bend around New Orleans, then winds for a hundred miles or more through the marshes of the Mississippi Delta. The delta marshes are composed of soils from Midwestern farms, Great Plains grazing lands and Rocky Mountain slopes, carried downstream by the river over the past 5,000 years and dumped in a great, muddy swirl at the edge of the Gulf of Mexico.

Five thousand square miles in area, this vast plain — not quite land and not quite water — is the largest wetland complex in the continental U.S.

It's one of America's most valuable ecosystems, critical to the survival of millions of migratory songbirds and waterfowl, billions of dollars in fisheries, and the unique regional culture of the Cajun people. It's also one of our most endangered coastal areas, where 25 square miles of wetlands wash into the sea each year.

Levees built to control seasonal river flooding prevent sediment deposition, while shipping channels accelerate the current at the river's mouth. Where once the Mississippi slowed and spread as it reached the Gulf — releasing its nourishing mud and steadily growing the wetlands — it now shoots more than 100 million tons of sediment annually into deep water off the continental shelf. A century of American engineering has reversed the course of geology itself at the mouth of the world's sixth-largest river.

Throughout the country, coastal ecosystems are threatened by human activity. Hydroelectric dams on the West Coast have ravaged salmon runs.

Global warming kills coral reefs in Florida and the Caribbean. Runoff from hog and chicken farms in the Southeast fuels blooms of toxic microorganisms. Here in the Northeast, we've filled about half our wetlands, polluted urban waterways and dammed virtually every major stream. The result is that many coastal waters — like upper Narragansett Bay — are unsafe for swimming and shell fishing, while once-abundant species from bay scallops to winter flounder to river herring have declined precipitously.

The situation is urgent — but by no means hopeless.

In December, I was one of about a dozen Rhode Islanders attending a major conference on coastal environmental restoration in New Orleans.

Restore America's Estuaries, an umbrella group of nonprofit organizations promoting efforts to repair the ecology of wetlands, rivers and other coastal systems nationwide, sponsored the meeting. The location of the conference in New Orleans, 16 months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city, was poignant. Much of the city has not been rebuilt. Thousands of houses in such low-lying areas as the Lower Ninth Ward and East New Orleans stand vacant and ruined. Less than half the city's pre-Katrina population has returned. And then, soon after Katrina hit New Orleans and points east, southwest Louisiana was battered by Hurricane Rita. That area is still suffering the effects of that storm.

So a deep malaise has taken root in coastal Louisiana — cynicism born of government failure.

The loss of coastal wetlands greatly contributed to the scale of the disaster along the entire Louisiana coast. Marshes and swamps protect inland areas from hurricane tides, reducing the

height of the surge and breaking the energy of the waves. Much of the conference centered on the Mississippi Delta wetlands – restoration needs and solutions.

Several large-scale coastal-restoration plans have been floated, but none has yet achieved consensus among technical experts – much less the larger world of coastal communities, political interests and the multi-billion dollar shipping and petroleum industries. It remains to be seen whether Louisiana can develop a plan that's acceptable to all stakeholders and whether the federal government will fund a project of sufficient scale to save the disappearing delta. One thing is certain, however – without bold and comprehensive action, the coast of Louisiana as we now know it will simply wash away.

The situation facing coastal ecosystems here on Narragansett Bay is less dire, but not fundamentally different. Policy-makers and the public have recognized that restoration is essential to preserving the aspects of our coast we value most – clean water, productive fisheries, abundant wildlife, pristine views. In 2002, the Rhode Island General Assembly authorized grant funding for coastal restoration and, in 2003, Governor Carcieri established goals for restoring the state's wetlands and rivers.

Nonprofit groups, government agencies, universities and corporations, working in partnership, have completed dozens of important projects – fresh- and salt-water wetland restorations from North Smithfield to Narragansett; fish ladders in Providence, Warren and Barrington; and seagrass plantings throughout Narragansett Bay.

Yet, as in coastal Louisiana, current efforts to restore the Bay ecosystem are not enough. And here, the biggest obstacles are fiscal and institutional, rather than technical.

What's holding us back? In some cases, regulations that successfully prevent harmful impacts to the environment hinder beneficial action – the very purpose of restoration. In others, better legal tools are needed – applying states' power of eminent domain, for example, to condemn and tear down useless dams. Some existing funding sources could be used more effectively – for example, the \$8.5 million "watershed-restoration" bond approved by Rhode Island voters in 2004 is not available to fund wetland-restoration or fish-passage projects.

State water-quality programs, historically focused on pollution, could pay more attention to basic ecosystem needs like river flow, groundwater levels and aquatic biodiversity. Government at all levels could accomplish far more by partnering more effectively with local organizations and communicating better with the public.

Legislation can address some of these issues, particularly by ensuring adequate funding and agency follow-through. But over the long haul, grass-roots momentum, citizen stewardship and public demand for real environmental improvement are far more important. On Narragansett Bay as on the Mississippi Delta, the choice is ours. We can muster the collective will and resources to create a future of vibrant restored coastal ecosystems – or let this moment of opportunity simply wash away.

Thomas Ardito is director of policy and communications with the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, based in Narragansett, and editor of the Narragansett Bay Journal.