

Red tape, Crawfishing et la Vie Acadienne

The Erosion of Louisiana's Wetlands in 'Cajun Country'



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Index

- Acknowledgements.....	4
- Maps.....	5
- 1: Introduction.....	6
- 2: Concerning Cajuns.....	10
- 3: Vermilion Vulnerability.....	15
- 3.1 Ecology.....	17
- 3.2 Hurricane and Surge Preparedness.....	20
- 3.3 Politics, Stakeholders and Insurance Companies.....	22
- 3.4 Economy; Agriculture and Personal Losses.....	28
- 4: Cajuns Coping.....	30
- 4.1 Coping Politically.....	32
- 4.2 Home Environment.....	34
- 4.3 Community.....	37
- 4.4 Coping Economically; Agriculture and Livelihood.....	39
- 5: Conclusion.....	41
- Epilogue.....	43
- Glossary.....	45
- Bibliography.....	46

Photograph front page: Erosion causes these trees at the banks of Coulee Kenny to fall over. Photo taken by author.

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Chapter 1: Introduction.

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

In his book *Europe and the People Without History* (1983) the anthropologist Eric Wolf stresses the importance of the incorporation of historical processes into the analysis when conducting an anthropological research. This has proven to be very true in Southern Louisiana, where this research was conducted. The objective of this research was getting an understanding of the ways in which environmental changes affect local communities, and how these changes are perceived and acted upon.

The research question is:

What coping strategies do the Cajuns of Vermilion Parish, Louisiana, employ to deal with the increasing environmental changes and environmental disasters?

The situation concerning environmental change in Southern Louisiana has proven to be complicated and multi-faceted. Residents of Vermilion Parish have to find a way to deal with a situation that arises from the interaction of different processes and circumstances. Ecology, history, agriculture, politics and culture are all aspects that have to be taken into account when unravelling the problems as well as to understand the ways in which efforts are made to deal with those problems. This thesis will explore these questions by looking into the different processes and circumstances from the viewpoint of Cajuns living in Vermilion Parish.

The impact of the changes on Cajuns living in Southern Louisiana is extensive, but social scientific research and statistics are lacking. Most of the research done on the subject of environmental change in Louisiana focuses on the New Orleans area. Due to the scarcer population in other parts of the state, many communities are overlooked in science, media and politics. But problems there are urgent as well, and people living in the countryside feel like

¹ Strength to Love, 1963

they are being forgotten. This thesis is scientifically and socially relevant as an effort to explore the environmental changes, their impact and consequences for some rural communities.

The research was conducted in Vermilion Parish, located in Southern Louisiana and bordering the Gulf of Mexico. Most of the interviews were held in the smaller towns like Delcambre, Perry, and Boston, and in Abbeville, which is the Vermilion Parish seat. Several interviews were done in other towns in Vermilion Parish, as well as in the City of Lafayette (Lafayette Parish). During these interviews an important subject was finding the reason why people choose to employ certain strategies when confronted with environmental changes and disasters. A major factor in these decisions turned out to be the importance of Cajun- and family history.

A large number of people living in Southern Louisiana are considered ‘Cajuns’; French descendants who were exiled from Nova Scotia by the British for refusing to pledge allegiance to the British crown, and who ended up in Southern Louisiana. For many centuries Cajuns have had to deal with external factors threatening the continuation of their culture. The Cajuns were able to successfully deal with a wide range of challenges to survive and to ensure the continuation of the Cajun culture. In the last decade this challenge is proving to be of a different magnitude. Survival skills learned from previous generations no longer suffice to deal with the recent environmental changes. The United States political structure causes locals to have to fight the ‘*red tape*’; bureaucratic constructions, in order to sustain their way of life. Politicians and other people in power said to be *crawfishing*; backing up, from promises to help sustain ‘La vie Acadienne’; the Cajun way of life.

In scientific and societal discussions, there is an emphasis on the possible impact of man-induced climate change causing environmental change around the world with rising temperatures, sea levels and an increase in frequency and impact of certain natural disasters such as hurricanes. In this thesis I will briefly discuss the current scientific discussions about climate change and environmental change, and explain why this thesis is about environmental change and disasters instead of ‘climate change’.

Through theories on coping strategies this thesis will examine the impact of the environmental changes and the ways in which Cajuns living in Louisiana are searching for ways to deal with them. By looking at the Cajuns situation through the concept of *vulnerability*, their coping strategies can be understood. Furthermore, through this concept the different processes that lead to the situation as it is today can be examined. The vulnerability of a group of people or an individual depends on many different factors. These factors can be

economical, political, social and institutional, and a lack of any of these in case of a disaster or environmental change (caused by natural processes and/ or human actions) can lead to a more vulnerable position and a limited number of coping strategies.

A significant challenge while doing research and writing this thesis was understanding and explaining the complexity and analyzing the interaction between the various factors, of the situation I had researched. Different local characteristics and processes cause the situation to be as it is today, but not all factors can be explained in detail or even be identified. The lack of transparency in United States politics, corruption, decisions based on economical gain rather than on preservation of the environment, the seemingly endless list of stakeholders involved, the unique Cajun way of viewing the world and solving problems, all contribute to a unique and challenging situation. In this thesis I will attempt to describe, explain and analyse this situation through different concepts combined with the views of the Cajuns themselves. It covers a broad field of subjects, each of which is a piece of the puzzle and has an important impact on the lives of the Cajuns. Each of these subjects alone could be enough grounds for specialists to do extensive research, be it politics, ecology or law. It is therefore likely that the readers of this thesis will end up with more questions than they have started with, and it was neither my goal nor my wish to answer all questions. My objective is that this thesis will provide readers with a framework, through which the Cajun situation and the ways in which Cajuns fight for the maintenance of their culture within the changing environmental characteristics, can be understood.

Vermilion Parish, where this research was conducted, was created in out of a part of Lafayette Parish in 1844. The town where I started my research and where I spent most of my time is called Perry. This town was originally called Perry's Bridge, and was established in 1817. It used to be a rather large community, with more inhabitants and economical activities than the rivalling cities Lafayette and Abbeville. Until 1848 Perry was home to the local seat of justice. Nowadays, Perry has no more than 200 inhabitants, and most of the signs that reveal Perry's blossoming history are gone. Many of the descendants of the early settlers are still living in Perry.

During the research I have employed different methods. Through participant observation and different interview techniques (semi-structured, (semi-)formal and informal interviews, informal conversations) I have collected the majority of the data. I have conducted formal interviews with 26 people, and about 50 informal conversations. With some respondents I have conducted a couple of interviews. I have also collected literature from local libraries, the University of Lafayette (UL), I have received information from the

‘Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness’ and from local politicians. I have also attended a couple of meetings of the ‘Abbeville Coastal Protection and Restoration Committee’. To protect the privacy of the people I have talked to during my research I have chosen to use pseudonyms when specific statements might be controversial or upon request from the respondents.

Following this introduction, chapter two will give an overview of Cajun culture and its history. This chapter will provide essential background information needed to understand the reasons why certain coping strategies are preferred, and to understand why the Cajuns are especially vulnerable to the consequences of recent changes. Chapter three is ‘Vermilion Vulnerability’, where through theories on vulnerability, limitations and possibilities of choices how to deal with the environmental changes and risks are explored. These choices influence the different coping strategies which are available to Cajuns living in Vermilion Parish. The different coping strategies Cajuns employ to deal with the changing environment are explored in chapter four; ‘Cajuns Coping’. The last chapter is the conclusion, followed by a glossary with frequently used US political terms and other terms that might not be known to most readers.

Perry’s Bridge versus Abbeville

At one time in history, Perry had a chance of becoming a big town because of its favorable location on several trading routes. According to one account a catholic priest, father Mergret wanted to build a church in the southern part of the parish. He was offered land in Perry that was subject to river floods. Perry was also known to be more of a center of Protestantism. Father Mergret thought Perry was unacceptable as such and moved upriver to build the church and planned for the development of a town around the church; Abbeville. A couple of years later Abbeville was chosen to get the right to hold court as well. This story explains why Perry lost its status as a large and significant town to its neighbor, Abbeville (Bienvenue et.al. 1983:12).

Chapter 2: Concerning Cajuns

Cajuns living in Vermilion Parish have to cope with the consequences of a complex situation. Several different processes and circumstances including ecology, history, agriculture, politics and culture are intertwined. These processes and circumstances need to be unravelled in order to understand the difficulties Cajuns in Vermilion Parish face, and to understand the ways in which Cajuns try to deal with them. This chapter will elaborate on the history and culture of Cajuns living in Vermilion parish.

The account starts in Nova Scotia, where early French settlers were exiled from Acadie, Nova Scotia, by the British for refusing to pledge allegiance to the British crown. “[The British governor] literally threw them on ships without consideration to family ties, and dropped off a few at a time along the entire eastern coast of North America. They were split up intentionally-he didn't want them back together again. He knew if they got together they'd probably try to come back and take over Nova Scotia again. There were about 8,000 Acadians-about half of whom died on the ships or shortly after being dropped off” (Deutsch & Peyton 1979:81). Families were scattered in the English colonies on the eastern seaboard and the West Indies, or they returned to France. “But by word of mouth the Acadians heard about Louisiana and were attracted there in large numbers. Even the Acadians who returned to France were dissatisfied; they had been away from France for 150 years. So they too turned to the French speaking colony that served as a haven for the displaced Acadians. [...] When the Louisiana area came under Spanish rule, the Spanish were receptive to the French-speaking immigrants too. There was no religious conflict and, besides, they just wanted to settle this wild territory. Spanish ships dropped the Acadians off wherever they wanted to go: some in New Orleans, some all the way up the Bayou Teche to St. Martinsville, which became the home-base for the Cajuns” (Deutsch & Peyton 1979: 81).

Many of the exiled families immigrated into Louisiana in small groups in the 1760's. (Bienvenue et.al. 1983:7) The Spanish government gave the Acadians access to the inhospitable wetlands of Southern Louisiana. With a history of being mostly fur traders and agriculturalists, the Acadians were not only able to survive, they were able to thrive, making the fertile wetlands suitable for agriculture, cattle raising and trapping wild animals for their fur. There had been some hurricanes and some floods of rivers in the past but until the 21st century people were able to deal with it. Communities were small, secluded and family oriented and made a living of the land. Education through schooling was not or hardly

available. The part of Louisiana where the Acadians settled became known as 'Acadiana', and the name 'Acadians' changed to 'Cajuns'.

Even though the Cajuns were able to successfully make the most of the environment they were considered 'lower class citizens'. The Cajun culture was looked down upon until the second half of the 20th century, with local governments banning the French language from schools and putting penalties on speaking French at school. Bob Jones: "My Grandfather lived in Abbeville, and my grandmother was raised in Marksville. They both only spoke French. They taught their children to speak French too. But when my ma married a Texan, he didn't want her to speak French. It was something a lot of people looked down on. So unfortunately I never learnt to speak French properly. My wife did learn French at home, she speaks it fluently". Bob's friend, Mike, did learn how to speak French. "A lot of older people speak French, sometimes a lot better than English. Now the generations younger than me (I'm 68) usually don't know how to speak French anymore."

"For a long time a stigma was attached to being a Cajun. In the 1950s the Cajuns were probably at their ebb; it was the low point in the history of the Cajun people. [...] The state of Louisiana was under the control of politicians from northern Louisiana and had been for the first half of the century." Politicians from Northern Louisiana were mostly from English, Scottish, Celtic or Irish descent, and they were keen on the prevalence of British language and culture in Louisiana like in Nova Scotia. "When the Cajuns got settled down there and they suddenly found themselves under the control of northern Louisianans, they found themselves under the same kind of oppressive rule they had formerly known. The Scotch-Irish were trying to mandate the English language throughout Louisiana to the point that in the early 1900s a law was written banning the speaking of Cajun French in the school systems. The way they rationalized this is that Cajun was considered an illiterate language. In fact, it was; there was no written Cajun language. There was no Cajun grammar. Cajun was so different from standard French that you couldn't write it in standard French. Like a lot of the Indian languages, no one had written it down. No one had even attempted to." (Deutsch & Peyton 1979:82)

In 1964 the US congress passes the ‘Civil Rights Act’. This act forbids discrimination based on race, color, religion or nationality. In the 1960ies, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was created which helped put French language back in school programs. In the seventies Cajun culture and the French language became more and more accepted and incorporated into Louisiana’s popular culture. In 1971 Louisiana’s first French-speaking governor of the 20th century, Edwin Edwards was elected. Cajun music was also becoming popular, leading to the creation of several festivals. Furthermore, Cajuns are now recognized as an ethnic minority. “Federal judge Hunter declared the Cajuns a minority protected by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the lawsuit of James Roach vs. Dresser Industries, Valve and Industries Division.”².

Cajun French in the 21st century

Although the situation changed for the benefit of Cajun Culture, there are not a lot of French-speaking Cajuns left in ‘Cajun Country’; many Cajuns from younger generations barely know to speak Cajun French. The reason for the failure to reintroduce Cajun language in everyday living was not found during this research. More on this subject can be found in the epilogue.

Nowadays, Cajun culture is not only accepted but appreciated and celebrated in Louisiana’s popular culture. Especially Cajun food and music are popular; numerous festivals year-round are dedicated to Cajun music and food, and Cajun culture is promoted by travel agencies and city governments to attract tourists. A Cajun cookbook puts it this way; ‘Cajun Country’ is a region in south Louisiana known for its rich culture and mouthwatering dishes. Its stretches over a 22-parish region called Acadiana. The characteristics of this rich vulture are that of warmth, the joy of life, and the bond of family. [...] they brought with them the love of family, fellowship and good food. [...] families gather around crawfish boils, gumbo dinners and boucheries.” (N. Bertrand, ed. 2005)

² <http://www.codofil.org/english/lafrenchhistory.html>



Checking crawfish traps. Photo made by author

During the research it became clear that the Cajun culture and being a ‘Cajun’ are tied to a strong notion of ‘belonging’ and a deep feeling of being historically ‘rooted’ in a specific location and in the community. This is an important thing to realize in order to understand the coping strategies Cajuns employ in order to deal with environmental change. When the first Cajuns arrived in Louisiana they were happy to finally have their own land and be able to feel at home somewhere. With hard work and persistence they were able to build prosperous communities and a thriving Cajun culture. These stories and sentiments became a part of Cajun culture and a couple of centuries later this feeling is still strong and vivid. Many families nowadays live on the same land their ancestors have lived on.

Many communities are made up of families living in the same town for generations. A large number of these families are interrelated because of family inheritances or intermarriage. In rural areas it is common to see a brother, sister, aunt, grandfather and nephew living on the same street. This means that there is a powerful social safety net available for people living in such rural communities. The interviews showed that even when there is no interrelation between two people, this community feeling is still acted upon. Neighbours help each other out no matter what. Old grievances are forgotten when the ‘going gets tough’. Being largely secluded because a lack of roads and means of transportation until

the sixties, communities were able to make it using these safety nets. This mindset is still there today in ‘Cajun country’.

Below you can find some ‘quick facts’ about Vermilion Parish. This background information may be helpful in understanding some of the next chapters, as some of the statistics may be quite surprising. For example the fact about the percentage of homeowners in Vermilion Parish; which is as high as 77.1 percent.

Quick Facts Vermilion Parish ³	
Land Area (miles)	1,174
Persons per mile	45.8
2005 Population	55,195
2000 Population	53,807
Percent under 18	26.3%
Percent White	82.8%
Percent Black	14.2%
Homeowners	77.1%
Median Income	\$31,544

³ http://vermilionparishpolicejury.com/ABOUT_profile.html

Chapter 3: Vermilion Vulnerability

After being exiled, marginalized and then finally being able to proudly express and celebrate Cajun Culture, another issue threatens Cajuns living in Southern Louisiana today. The issue that threatens Cajun culture nowadays derives from an interaction of ecological changes caused by both anthropogenic and natural processes. Capitalistic ideals have pushed (inter-) national companies, governments and individuals to seek natural resources in and near the vulnerable wetlands, causing the natural barriers and natural floodplains to be damaged. The scale of the impact was not completely understood until hurricane Rita hit in 2005, followed by hurricane Ike three years later. This chapter will explore the impact of the environmental change for Cajuns living in Vermilion parish through theories on vulnerability. Together with the previous chapter on Cajun culture and context, it will provide a holistic understanding of the changing situation and the coping strategies, which will follow in the next chapter.

Vulnerability is described by Moran [et al.] as “shaped by ongoing processes of social differentiation and marginalization, within a specific social history of access to productive resources, formal and informal social security arrangements, state development policies, conflicts, etc. The resulting distribution of material stocks and access to income opportunities, land and other material resources, as well as access to formal and informal social security arrangements, spells out the material and social conditions circumscribing vulnerability for some households and security for others” (2006:347). This definition shows vulnerability as being shaped by several different factors. The research in Vermilion parish showed that this is true in this case, but other aspects of the definition are not applicable. The definition is not specific enough to apply to the situation in Vermilion Parish, as the different processes and factors leading to the vulnerability of a group or individual are not all identified. Furthermore, this definition shows the emphasis that is placed on marginalization in scientific discussions on vulnerability. There is a general assumption that in case of a disaster people are not equally affected. People who are considered marginalized are said to take a much bigger hit, are less likely to completely recover and are more likely to have health problems. In Vermilion parish people from different backgrounds, with a wide range of resources and safety nets were all affected. Different individuals had to deal with different consequences, but these differences could not all be contributed to an income or class difference. Other

factors played a larger part, and these factors will be considered in this chapter and the next through other theories on vulnerability.

Vulnerability is a key concept in understanding the ways in which people cope with environmental distress and disasters, as it sheds a light on the degree of impact it has and the ways in which people are able to recover. Blaikie [et al.] give a definition of the concept which is as follows; “the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone’s life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or society (1994:9).

Blaikie [et al.] argue that it is crucial to understand that disasters are not only caused by natural events, but that they are also a product of the social, economical and political environment (1994:2). A narrow focus is therefore not possible, as I have argued in the introduction of this thesis. In order to research disasters; its causes, consequences and the ways in which people cope with these events, multiple factors have to be taken into consideration. With a broader approach, policies and efforts to reduce the size and impact of disasters have more potential to make a difference. A time dimension is important in this analysis, as human activities from the past may still be affecting physical processes today and these effects may be noticed over a great distance. Furthermore, “social, economic and political processes are themselves often modified by a disaster in ways that make some people more vulnerable to an extreme event in the future” (Blaikie [et.al] 1994: 5-6). This chapter will explore the different factors which contribute to the vulnerable position which Cajuns living in Vermilion Parish have to deal with.

3.1 Ecology

As I showed earlier in this chapter, natural disasters are not solely caused by nature even though it may be the most apparent and noticeable immediate cause. A factor that has increased the vulnerability of Cajuns living in Southern Louisiana has to do with the changing ecological environment. In many parts of the United States, like Louisiana, Texas and Florida, hurricanes occur regularly and have known risks. Many interviews showed that hurricanes are looked upon with some caution, but they are not as feared as other natural disasters. Some respondents referred to the earthquake in Haiti. They said that hurricanes are bad, but compared to earthquakes or volcano eruptions they have relatively mild consequences. When a hurricane approaches, people are able to prepare for it in a number of ways, and it is possible to track its course to see where it will hit hardest. Hurricane Rita changed the way in which inhabitants of Southern Louisiana look at approaching hurricanes. The morning after hurricane Rita had passed, Southern Louisiana and Texas were hit by a major surge, pushing salt water far inland. "A Surge is the worst natural thing that can happen here. Hurricanes are inconvenient, but I have a generator and the city has a generator for the tap water. We know how to prepare for an approaching hurricane, but we were not prepared for the surge"⁴. When the water from the surges retreated, the severity of the economical and social consequences became clear. What caused hurricane Rita to have such devastating consequences? The answer to this question can best be explained by looking at the environmental changes the Louisiana wetlands have gone through in the last century.

With the industrial revolution and the increasing scale of capitalist ideology, the federal and state government and multinationals began to realize the potential of Louisiana's resources for making a profit. Federal and state government granted permission to various companies to dredge clam and oyster shells from reefs offshore. These shells were used for various purposes, like making foundations for houses and roads. The state got a percentage of the revenues. These shell reefs had always protected the Louisiana coast, slowing down both storm surges and erosion. With the dredging of these shells, a large portion of Louisiana's natural barrier reefs were destroyed.: "What really hurt was dredging the reef barriers (made of clam shells and oyster shells). It used to help slow down erosion and surges, but now the water can come further north, further inland. Before they had hard surface roads, they used the clam and oyster shells to fortify roads. The government eventually put a stop to it, but the

⁴ Interview Mike 25-03

damage was already done. Now they use limestone.”⁵ “The state got greedy. These shells were sold by the state for 15 cents a cubic yard.”⁶

Another issue is the discovery of oil near or on the Louisiana coastline. It was hard to get to the oil wells in the swampy wetlands, because the heavy materials needed for drilling could not be brought to the site by land. Inlets leading from the Mexican gulf to the sites were created to allow transport by water. This has changed the ecosystem of the wetlands, because of saltwater spill into the freshwater or brackish wetlands. Many plants native to the wetlands died, causing the area to erode even faster due to lack of roots holding the land together. The levee systems for flood control and the canalling of rivers for commercial purposes decreased the possibility of the rivers to bring new sediment to the eroding coastline. “The Boston Canal was cleaned to where the bottom was 60 feet wide and the top was 90 feet wide, and it was dug to 9 feet deep. Well, the oil industry has come in and has used bigger and bigger boats, bigger and bigger barges, and the bigger the boats become, the bigger the propellers become and you wash out the sides of the canal. Near the town of Boston the canal is now approximately 300 feet wide. So what has happened is, you’ve created a highway for tides. The other problem is South of Pecan Island, they decided to dig a canal from Intracoastal city to the gulf, to create a shortcut without having to go through the bay; the freshwater Bayou Channel. Like the Boston Canal, this channel is now a lot wider than it used to be. The same thing happened in Delcambre Canal. All three of them are now a highway for a surge. The issue of protection has never been addressed like you addressed it in Holland.”⁷

Another reason for environmental change which is often mentioned by scientists is climate change. There is an extensive amount of scientific literature on the subject, with many different findings and conclusions. In this research the question about the causes for the environmental changes is not viewed through the different scientific debates, but through the eyes of the local residents. When talking about the issue of environmental change, the words ‘climate change’ were rarely uttered. Several respondents think there might be man-made factors or natural changes causing the surges, but the exact cause doesn’t really matter. What matters are the consequences of these changes, and finding solutions for them. “ I think the surges are caused by a natural cycle of temperature change, but global warming makes it worse. We have higher tides, and the inlets made for the oil industry to access the wetlands by sea speeds up erosion. The salt water that enters the wetlands also kills vegetation that used to

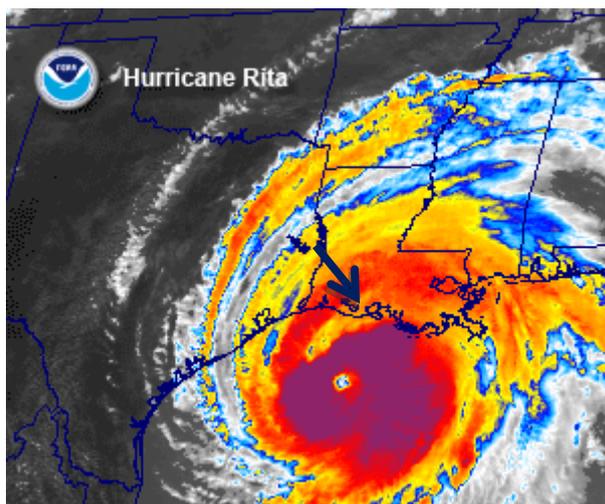
⁵ Interview Michael 25-03

⁶ Interview Bob 23-03

⁷ Interview Brigadier General Robert LeBlanc AUS (ret.). 11-03 (for additional reference, see bibliography)

hold the soil, the natural buffer is disappearing. It was caused by a combination of things. We had three hurricanes in 5 years, we need to have protection along the coastline.”⁸

Not all hurricanes that make landfall have the same consequences everywhere. Areas in Louisiana at risk for storm surges are spared from rising waters when a hurricane passes to their left. “The North-East quadrant of the hurricane is the worst because of the direction of the wind. So if a hurricane passes to your left, the risk of a surge coming in after the hurricane increases.”⁹ This is what happened for both Rita (see map below) and Ike.



<http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/img/climate/research/2005/rita/hurr-rita-irloop.gif>

When Hurricane Rita made landfall along the Texas/Louisiana border on September 24, 2005, it was a category 3 hurricane with winds in excess of 120 miles per hour pushing a 20 foot storm surge. The devastation it left behind made it the third most expensive natural disaster in US history.

“Hurricane Rita was the most powerful hurricane in the modern records in the gulf of Mexico. The damage assessment was estimated to be about 10 billion, resulting in being in the top 10 storms in cost. [...] [in Vermilion Parish] the first surge of approximately 18-20 feet caused extensive damage along the coastal area and the second surge of 10-13 feet primarily along the edge of Vermilion Bay. This pushed seawater as far as 10 miles inland. It was September 27th before this flood water returned to the bay and gulf” (LeBlanc 2008:274).

Hurricane Ike started to cause a surge in southern Louisiana on September 11th, 2008. “After the eye of Hurricane Ike moved past Iberia and Vermilion parishes, the south winds of the hurricane forced even more water into Iberia and Vermilion parishes and expanded the areas flooded even further northward. [...] Hurricane Ike made landfall in the Galveston Island area of Texas late on the night of September 12 and early on the morning of September 13, 2008.”¹⁰ On September the 15th, flood waters finally started to recede.

⁸ Interview Hank 23-02

⁹ Interview Michael 25-03

¹⁰ <http://leanweb.org/campaigns/hurricanes-gustav-and-ike/hurricane-ike-damage-assessment-day-2.html> (10-06-10)

3.2 Hurricane and Surge Preparedness

The Louisiana State government takes a list of measures to try to keep its citizens safe in case a hurricane is about to make landfall at the Louisiana coast. In some severe cases they order a mandatory evacuation for the residents of the areas at risk. Citizens are provided with evacuation guides¹¹ containing maps with the directions and routes for evacuation, a list with contents for a disaster kit, the contact information of several agencies and radio frequencies. Citizens prepare their homes as much as possible to try to avoid damage. Many people visit family further north or stay in hotels until the hurricane's strength decreases. I have encountered numerous people who rather stay put than evacuating though. "We board up the windows, and store up as much water as we can. Try to get some canned goods and stuff like that, get gas... we have two little generators, to run the freezer and the water well and an air conditioner. We keep things in the yard from flying around and then, start cooking. No electricity, so you get all the food out of the fridge, you just barbecue, and you cook and get drunk and just watch the rain"¹² This might seem dangerous, and the majority of Vermilion Cajuns does seem to evacuate. But the evacuation is far from pleasant, so staying home is sometimes a more appealing alternative. "We left one time, and I don't think we'll ever leave again unless there's a category five, which is the worst. It's a hassle. If you leave.. Number one you have to find a place to stay. If you don't make reservations ahead of time.. And you never know where the hurricane is going, you know. How can you make reservations to leave, if you don't even know where the hurricane is gonna hit. Okay, then when you leave, the traffic is bumper to bumper, moving at 2 miles an hour. If it's moving. You get out of line, you know, you get off the road to get gas, you never get back on. It's a hassle. And then to find a place to stay. We did it with daddy one time. Cause he'd had open heart surgery. So in case any thing happened.. Never again, never again. We wound up in a motel, the place was filthy, loaded with roaches, we left that night! We checked in, we stayed what, an hour maybe two. It was that bad. We went on, kept up going north and found a motel in Shreveport or whatever. And expensive, you know!"¹³

With the changing environmental circumstances preparations for a hurricane become more difficult. A possible surge is more threatening to many Cajuns than the hurricane itself. Whether people evacuate or stay, the Cajuns have learnt to deal with the hurricanes. But the

¹¹ Louisiana Citizen Awareness and Disaster Evacuation Guide, Volume 1

¹² Interview Mika 16-04

¹³ Interview Clyde 13-04

preparations made are no match for a rising surge. Generators are flooded and thus useless, rising waters seep through boarded windows and doors, and all electrical equipment like cars and agricultural machinery become ruined and eroded because of the salt water. It takes a lot longer for evacuees to be able to return home as roads are flooded and inaccessible. More extensive measures have to be taken in an attempt to minimize damage done by a surge. These measures will be discussed in the next chapter; 'Cajuns Coping'.

3.3 Politics, Stakeholders and Insurance Companies

The political factor adds to the vulnerability of Cajuns living in Southern Louisiana. Throughout the research many different explanations and stories were told that show in which ways politics and power relations add to the difficulties for finding ways to deal with the environmental changes. Getting funding for projects to decrease the effects of a storm surge is proving to be difficult. Politics furthermore appear in conversations about money received after hurricane Rita, the oil industry and its interests, revenues and consequences, local political corruption, dealing with environmental problems, and in conversations about local political committees trying to protect the parish. Much of the political vulnerability has to do with the way in which American politics are organised. The different levels; federal, state, and parish, cause the system to be very bureaucratic. This has a big impact on local efforts for change and protection, local politics, insurance policies and conservation initiatives.

“There used to be no declared lines of what was considered ‘wetlands’. Since the hurricanes, this changed; a boundary was made. Everything below LA 14 is considered wetlands.”¹⁴ But this arbitrary line has major consequences. Some areas are considered *Special Flood Hazard Areas (SFHA)*. Home owners living in this area are required by law to buy flood insurance. The insurance rates for people living in SFHA are significantly higher than for people living in other areas. According to Paul this is a strategy employed by the government in order to get local residents to move away from the area. “The government only threw money at the problem instead of dealing with the roots of the problems; the methods with which oil is being extracted and the diversion of water for commercial purposes.”¹⁵

There is a lot of money involved in commercial businesses in Louisiana. The state and federal politicians have more to gain from oil and shipping business than from other activities in Louisiana like agriculture. “Rather than addressing the issue, the government is ready to sacrifice land. The farmers who have the ability to feed the world are not helped. They [the governments] make us feel like second class citizens. What if we stopped producing food for a year? There was not a problem for the oil companies. They had some repairs to make but they were paid for. We have a dependency on oil, but not on food etcetera? It should be equally important, we are feeding them.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview Stanley 30-03

¹⁵ Interview Stanley 30-03

¹⁶ Interview Hank 23-02



A commercial cargo ship carrying chemicals over the Vermilion River through Perry. Photo taken by author

The way in which the political system of the United States is organized, has a great impact on the problems Cajuns face and limits the possibilities of dealing with those problems. Whether or not funds are given to a certain group of people or individual to address problems has a lot to do with the possibility to win votes there, the number of people living in a certain area, and on the economical gain. In addition, Louisiana does not have a clean track record when looking at the way the state government has spent its money over the last decades. There is a common belief among the residents of Vermilion Parish and other parishes that corruption is thriving. Michael explains that the problem is that the people who are politically in charge of Louisiana are not acting like statesmen; people who are supposed to represent the residents of the state but that the people in charge are politicians, looking at short term gain of profits and votes.¹⁷ Therefore there is a short term interest in state affairs, with actions only taken when it will be profitable till the next elections. A local newspaper on the subject: “For years our brave farmers, cattlemen and coastal landowners have suffered the abuse and neglect of our wetlands by industry, the State and Federal governments. Our local leaders are obviously frustrated by the abandonment by the very governments we fund and rely upon for assistance. Just recently, Senator Mary Landrieu toured our parish and as if on cue, stated “...don’t count on the Corps of Engineers as they are backed up with \$40 Billion of projects, and Congress only allocates \$5 Billion a year.”¹⁸ Money just doesn’t seem to be

¹⁷ Interview Michael 25-03

¹⁸ <http://www.abbevilienow.com/content/police-jury-levee-tax-bad-idea>

available to solve the problems the citizens of Vermilion Parish are facing. “The Government is not really helping here along the coast. Billions are sent across the sea, but they do not take care of their own. I had to go back to training horses more, which is hard work. Training horses in Europe and training horse trainers. 40 percent of gas for the US comes through this area. They should do more to protect that but this doesn’t happen, too much politics and red tape. The loan I requested to rebuild my cattle- and horse ranch didn’t come through. Agriculture was not bailed out when banks and other counties were ”. ¹⁹

Rural residents feel they are being left out by the state and federal government. Some respondents believed the reason for the lack of help after hurricane Rita had to do with the number of people living in the affected area. When New Orleans was hit by hurricane Katrina, people were said to get more (financial) aid because of the media attention and because of the number of potential political votes. The agenda of the political system is said to focus on short term (political) gain rather than real concern for all US citizens. “Politics being politics in the United States, Unlike in Holland in ’53 only a fraction of the United States, only a fraction of Louisiana is being flooded, which is the coastal area. But it’s the most important area for the state of Louisiana. Because you have oil, you have minerals, and you have all this seafood here. ²⁰ The general public just does not seem to realize the important economical role Southern Louisiana plays in the United States, and there seems to be even less state- and federal concern for the people being affected in coastal Louisiana.

Another issue concerning politics and stakeholders is the insurance of homes, businesses and properties. Before hurricane Rita, many residents in Vermilion Parish did not have flood insurance, or thought they were insured, but when they made claims they were turned down because some companies said the flood caused by Rita was a sea surge, not a flood, and therefore not part of the insurance contract. After the hurricanes many companies increased their insurance rates, making it more difficult to get insurance. The *Federal Emergency Management Agency* (FEMA) runs a National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) that is supposed to make it possible for every home owner to get an affordable insurance. The rates vary according to ‘*Base flood elevation*’ and official flood hazard predictions. These predictions however are said to be arbitrary, because of unpredictability and locality of possible new floods. In areas at high risk for flooding, flood insurance of homes is mandatory²¹. But it is impossible to insure a home at risk for flooding unless the house in

¹⁹ Interview Hank 23-02

²⁰ Interview BG LeBlanc 11-03

²¹ <http://www.lamappingproject.com/floodreodata-insuranceb.html>

question is altered in order to meet specific standards which are dictated by the federal government. When a house is located in a moderate or high risk area, houses have to be altered to meet certain standard in order to get FEMA insurance. Most times this means that houses have to be elevated to a certain height; the *Base Flood Elevation* (BFE) ; “The computed elevation to which floodwater is anticipated to rise during the base flood.”²² The *Base flood* means “a flood having a one percent chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This is the regulatory standard also referred to as the "100-year flood." The base flood is the national standard used by the NFIP and all Federal agencies for the purposes of requiring the purchase of flood insurance and regulating new development”.²³

There are several ways to get funding for the elevation of homes in areas at risk for flooding like state programs and non-governmental initiatives. Some people in Vermilion Parish were able to elevate their homes with the help of these programs. These programs are under heavy criticism though. There is often a lot of bureaucracy tied to these programs, which causes some people to benefit but others to be left out because they don't meet certain set standards to be able to receive the funding or because they don't know how to ‘work the system’. In some cases where people would be able to get funding, they may be forced by other circumstances to move anyway. For elderly people for instance, elevating might not be an option. Elevation of a home usually means that the resident of that property has to walk the stairs each day. Some people are physically not able to make such an effort just to enter the house. Insurance of (agricultural) businesses may be even more problematic. Agriculture is a significant provider of labor and income in Louisiana. Many businesses were not insured prior to hurricane Rita. In addition, many ranch owners and farmers usually do not have a lot of savings, as most profits are not invested in banks but in the business. Businesses that were insured prior to hurricane Rita, or three years later, before Ike hit, were not out of the woods either. Even if a business is insured, all the costs from a surge can never be fully compensated. Older machines which functioned perfectly prior to the surge have to be replaced by more expensive new machines, while only the current value of the machine is granted through insurance. Lost cattle has to be proven to be dead in order to get compensation, and long-term income losses as a result from a period of rebuilding, is for the rancher or farmer to pay. The next paragraph will further elaborate on consequences of the environmental change and disasters for the agricultural sector as well as other economical and personal consequences.

²² http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/floodplain/nfipkeywords/base_flood_elevation.shtm

²³ http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/floodplain/nfipkeywords/base_flood.shtm

3.4 Economy; Agricultural and Personal Losses

A large part of the Vermilion Parish economy depends on agricultural practices. Vermilion Parish is home to many cattle- and horse ranches, crawfish farms, and rice- and sugar cane fields. Many residents of Vermilion parish are dependent on seasonal agricultural jobs to make a living, or they have their own fields of varying sizes as an investment. “During the hurricane, the economic base of the parish was undermined with a total loss of agricultural production nearing \$50 million.”²⁴ These losses affected not only the property owners, but also many other locals who are able to make ends meet by using agricultural activities as a source of income. Although some people whose house was lost or damaged by hurricane Rita were compensated by insurance companies, non-governmental organizations or governmental programs, loss of income was not compensated for. “The devastation to the rice and cane harvests, and the huge loss of cattle during the storm (Rita) made clear that the economy of the parish is much too dependent on agricultural produce”.²⁵ Hank, a cattle and horse rancher with about 700 acres of land living just a few miles from the Gulf took a big hit as well. “I used to have crawfish, rice, cattle and horses. I am the fourth generation on this land. I thought the surge caused by Rita was gonna be a onetime freak thing. I lost livestock, hay, and fences. Fields had to be flushed to get rid of the saline waters contaminating the land. My business finally started to make a profit again after 2.5 years, when Ike hit three years later.”²⁶

Damage Agriculture Vermilion Parish

“Approximately 60,000 acres of cropland was flooded with saltwater, ruining the rice and cane crops worth an estimated \$50 million. It is estimated that 9,500 cattle were killed and at least one-third of the remaining herds require winter feed due to the loss of grazing land, plus 350 miles of fencing was destroyed.” (Louisiana Recovery Authority 2006:45)

“More than 75 percent of the parish was flooded by two storm surges [caused by hurricane Rita]. The surges inundated fields with salt water and killed an estimated 9,500 head of cattle. 60,000 acres of pastureland were inundated with saltwater and 350 miles of fencing necessary for cattle herding was destroyed. At least one third of all parish herds

²⁴ http://www.louisianaspeaks-parishplans.org/IndParishHomepage_BaselineNeedsAssessment.cfm?EntID=18

²⁵ http://www.louisianaspeaks-parishplans.org/IndParishHomepage_BaselineNeedsAssessment.cfm?EntID=18

²⁶ Interview Hank 26-03

required winter feed due to the loss of available grazing land. Available estimates are that \$10 million in lost income will result from the 25,000 acres of rice which cannot be planted in 2006 due to high levels of salt in parish soils.²⁷ Hurricane Ike caused a lot of damage to agricultural fields as well, only three years after hurricane Rita. The surge caused by Ike, brought salt water into Vermilion Parish again. “The hurricane storm surge caused by Hurricane Ike and the accompanying strong south winds pushed salt water from the Gulf of Mexico and brackish waters from Vermilion and Weeks Bay into the fresh water bodies and covered the land surfaces in the lower two-thirds of Iberia and Vermilion parishes.”²⁸



Damage done by the surge following hurricane Rita. Photo taken by Brian Choate

The surges had a lot of other long-term consequences as well. Cattle and horses could not get access to drinking water due to high salinity of ditches, bayous and ground water. Rice, hay and other agricultural products stored for sale or private usage were lost. Soils were contaminated and had to be flushed with fresh water numerous times. A research conducted by the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (L.E.A.N.) concluded that soil in Vermilion Parish was contaminated not only with salt but with chemicals as well. “All six locations sampled in Vermilion Parish (Delcambre, south of Erath, Henry, Esther and Cow Island) had

²⁷ http://www.louisianaspeaks-parishplans.org/IndParishHomepage_BaselineNeedsAssessment.cfm?EntID=18

²⁸ <http://leanweb.org/campaigns/hurricanes-gustav-and-ike/hurricane-ike-damage-assessment-day-2-2.html>

storm surge deposited sediments with Arsenic concentrations in excess of the EPA (US Environmental Protection Agency) Region VI Soil Screening Level. The sediments also contained elevated levels of Barium, Chromium and Lead which added to the cumulative impacts associated with the Arsenic contaminated sediments.”²⁹

Due to the nature of the effects of both the hurricanes Rita and Ike, damage to homes was also more extensive than during other hurricanes. Because people living in southern Louisiana were used to dealing with hurricanes, they usually do not cause so much damage. Houses are boarded up and food, water and gasoline are stored in advance of an approaching hurricane. The surge however was something the Cajuns were not prepared for. The sea surge travelled over land, through bayous, coulees and marshes far inland, damaging everything in its path. A large number of homes became inhabitable due to water damage and moulds, especially in cities close to shore like Intracoastal city and Pecan Island. Many people who had left for the hurricane came back the next day to be surprised by water levels rising.

Housing Damage in Vermilion Parish	
<u>Owner-Occupied Units</u>	
Total Damaged	5,638
Flood Damaged	2,616
Major or Severe Damage	2,108
Major or Severe Flood Damage	1,874
<u>Rental Units</u>	
Total Damaged	1,862
Flood Damaged	633
Major or Severe Damage	468
Major or Severe Flood Damage	436
Source: FEMA	

With only a little over 55,000 inhabitants living in Vermilion Parish, the percentage of people who had damage to their homes is very high. The rising surge had a lot of power, sweeping away trees, animals, houses, fences and even graves. In the days after the surges of both Rita and Ike it became clear that in some locations caskets and grave stones had been displaced by the water. Employees of the Vermilion Parish Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, and the FEMA tried to recover all the missing caskets. Some unmarked caskets had to be sent to the Coroner’s office for identification of the bodies. This example shows the

²⁹ <http://data.leanweb.org/katrina/verm.html>

force of the surges, but it also shows the emotional impact it had on residents. To come back to not only a damaged house, but to find loved ones missing from what was supposed to be the final resting place is a tough thing to deal with.

On Pecan Island, many homes as well as the Pecan Island high school were damaged. Many people were not able to rebuild as a result of the stricter guidelines for new homes, making it much more expensive. The number of people living in Pecan Island had therefore dramatically decreased, resulting in the permanent closure of the high school.

Chapter 4 Cajuns Coping

In the previous chapter I described the different aspects contributing to the vulnerability of Cajuns in Vermilion Parish. This chapter seems to paint a grim story with a sad ending. But we humans are not passive spectators of our own lives. We are able to assess and analyze a situation, and make conscious choices. These choices might be constrained by a vulnerable position, but there are choices nevertheless. Circumstances can change by the choices that are made. This chapter will show what choices are made in order to deal with the current situation and to try to change these circumstances.

In all kinds of situations throughout history individuals and societies have had to find ways to cope with difficult, painful or stressful changing situations. There is a great amount of scientific literature on different coping strategies, including economic, social, survival, adaptive and proactive strategies. “The term “coping” is usually used to refer to those personal, contextual, and/or social strategies which people use in dealing with situations that are perceived as causing stress or psychological distress. It should be noted that coping is regarded as a voluntary and conscious effort, rather than an automatic or instinctive act.” (Mohino [et al.] 2004:42). This means that in order to deal with stressful or unwanted situations, people consciously chose to employ a certain strategy to deal with the situation at hand. But the definition of coping strategies by Mohino [et.al] does not pay attention to the limitations people face when choosing for a certain strategy. Murphy and Moriarty have a broader conception of coping strategies, they state that “Coping is the manner in which people act within existing resources and range of expectations of a situation to achieve various ends. In general, this involves no more than ‘managing resources’, but usually means how it is done in unusual, abnormal and adverse situations. Thus coping can include defence mechanisms, active ways of solving problems and methods for handling stress” (Murphy and Moriarty 1976 in: Blaikie [et al.] 1994:62). In this definition they include limitations on choices that people can make, depending on the number of resources available to them. These limitations were explored in the previous chapter, with the concept of vulnerability.

Being vulnerable in terms of power, budget, location, economy or ecology limit the number of coping strategies for members of a community. But the fact that the number of coping strategies is limited, does not mean they are absent. In Vermilion Parish residents have found a number of ways to cope with the changing environment and the increasing risks. Coping strategies “grow out of the recognition of the risk of an event occurring and of

established patterns of response” (Blaikie [et.al] 1994: 69). In Vermilion Parish this recognition came when, after hurricane Rita, hurricane Ike caused a storm surge as well. Before hurricane Ike hit, residents from Vermilion Parish thought or hoped that the consequences from hurricane Rita were a ‘once in a lifetime event’. When hurricane Ike hit three years later residents became aware that the storm surges might turn out to be part of a pattern for which it is best to find ways to prepare. Important to keep in mind, is that coping strategies “ seek not just survival, but also the maintenance of family, household and community cohesion.” (Blaikie [et.al] 1994: 69) This is definitely the case in Vermilion Parish, where history, culture and the maintenance of a way of life all have a big influence on the choices Cajuns make.

The capacity for recovery after a disaster depends on many different circumstances including social, economical, political, ideological and cultural aspects (Oliver-Smith 2002: 63). The potential for different coping strategies to be successful depend on these aspects too. Some aspects contribute to a strategy being successful, other aspects might work against coping efforts. This chapter will examine different coping strategies as well as the circumstances acting as either roadblocks or as enablers in the fight for the maintenance of Cajun culture and the Cajun way of life.

4.1 Coping Politically

The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), a federal organization in charge of developing and maintaining the US water (-ways) has recently proposed a study to investigate possibilities for a coastal protection project for a couple of parishes, including Vermilion parish. The investigation will cost 8 million dollars, “[and] will include an investigation into the feasibility of building a controversial \$2.1 billion, 120-mile-long, 12-foot-high armored earthen levee that environmentalists sometimes derisively call “The Great Wall of Louisiana.”³⁰ These kinds of plans seem to be more of a gesture than an actual plan however. One of the police jurors of vermilion parish said in an interview that ‘the problem with the state government is that they are reactive instead of proactive’³¹ It takes too long for problems to be addressed, if they get addressed at all. Many studies are being conducted in order to investigate coastal protection. These studies cost millions, and they eventually end up on a shelf where they will stay, if a plan is not approved by congress or if funding is withdrawn because of political or economical reasons. “The Vermilion Parish Police Jury is tired of waiting for the Federal Government to help fight the flood problem that the parish has experienced the last five years because of two storm surges caused by two hurricanes. It is taking the fight into its own hands. The Police Jury unanimously approved to call a special election on May 1 [this election is now postponed to October 2010] to have residents approve a bond sale and a property tax to help battle coastal flooding that has hampered the parish for the last five years. Voters will be asked to approve general obligation bonds to raise \$15 million to help pay for \$27.6 million worth of hurricane protection projects. The federal and state governments are expected to contribute \$12.7 million and the parish will chip in the rest”.³²

There is a lot of controversy in Vermilion Parish concerning this proposed levee tax. Paul Neal, a local land owner and businessman wonders “why locals should pay for state greed?”³³. Locals did not cause the environment and natural barriers to deteriorate, so they should not be held responsible. The levee proposed by the Vermilion Police Jury will be about four feet high. In addition barges will be placed in a couple of canals to slow down future storm surges. The previous surges caused by Rita and Ike were estimated to be as high as 12

³⁰ http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/01/corps_to_study_southwest_louis.html

³¹ Interview 09-03

³² <http://www.abbevilienow.com/content/police-jury-eyes-flood-protection-tax>

³³ Informal conversation Paul Neal 23-02

feet high³⁴. This height as registered by FEMA does not include varying heights due to wave action. To the question how a four- foot levee could protect Vermilion Parish from a 12- foot surge, the answer from Hank was clear. “You have to start somewhere. The federal government doesn’t see the need to do anything, when they realize they have a problem it is too late.”³⁵ Brigadier General LeBlanc (ret.) explains the proposed levee would function as a first buffer zone. “What you have to do in Louisiana is put a rock barrier as a coastline. And you have to put succeeding buffer zones to break that surge.” Rather than doing nothing and waiting for a next surge to hit, these are attempts to provide Vermilion Parish with the well-needed protection. Waiting for the federal or government to do something might take years or even decades, leaving the communities of Vermilion Parish defenceless in the mean time. “With the levee tax, maybe 25 years from now we’ll have protection, like you have [in Holland].”³⁶

There are numerous ideas among the Cajuns living in Vermilion Parish to solve the environmental problems. These include the restoration of natural course of the Mississippi, as it will rebuild the wetlands naturally through the disposition of sediments. This will also help pushing the salt water out of the wetlands. Other solutions include the sinking of barges or car wrecks along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, to give oysters and clams a point of attachment to rebuild the natural barrier reefs. These kinds of solutions are not likely to be put into action any time soon, as many different stakeholders are involved. International shipping traffic, oil drilling and gas transportation seem to have priority at federal level. Locals fear that a real solution may not come until the severity of the situation has a nation- or statewide impact.

The fact that wetlands along the Louisiana coast are disappearing and the consequences it has, are not part of the common knowledge in Louisiana. In Lafayette I met a primary school teacher who teaches children about the environment. When asked what it was exactly that she taught the children she replied; “I teach them about sustainability; composting, recycling etcetera.”³⁷ She was unaware of the environmental problems further south. Lafayette is located at only about 30 miles from the Vermillion Bay, which is connected to the Gulf of Mexico. This might seem like an extreme example but it shows that an effort has to be made to raise awareness in the rest of Louisiana and the United States concerning the problems threatening coastal Louisiana.

³⁴ http://www.fema.gov/pdf/hazard/flood/recoverydata/rita/maps/rita_la_vm-z60.pdf

³⁵ Informal conversation Hank 26-03

³⁶ Interview 11-03

³⁷ Informal conversation 05-04

4.2 Home Environment

Besides the erosion of the wetlands as discussed in chapter three, properties on the edge of bayous or coulees are also eroding. As a result of changing water levels caused by storms or tides, and because of wave action caused by commercial shipping numerous properties in Vermilion Parish are at risk. Donna, a property owner in Perry sees her land being washed away each time a commercial boat carrying limestone, oil or chemicals like benzene passes by. The worst part about it is not the soil disappearing, but what this soil represents. Many pieces of land pass from generation to generation, functioning as part of the inheritance for the children. It is technically possible to stop the erosion by constructing wooden fences at the river's edge. This solution is costly though, and most people in Vermilion Parish are not able to afford such an investment. Donna said it would cost about 1000 dollars a foot to construct such a protective wall.³⁸ People who try to make such a fence using cheaper materials or techniques may find their property caving in after all after a couple of years.



This wooden deck is at risk of caving in because of erosion. Photo taken by author.

Another solution is found in dumping all sorts of materials at the water's edge. Residents from the neighbourhood or local organisations dump Christmas trees, tires and concrete rubble to try to slow down erosion along the river. Donna says it is a matter of authority, nobody feels responsible for the solution. Federal and state government demand taxes and

³⁸ Interview Donna 25-02

permits from local residents, but they don't do anything in return. "Therefore we try to stop the erosion ourselves."

People with more economical or political leverage are able to employ other strategies to protect their way of life. The owners of the Tabasco factory on Avery Island had both the means and methods to come up with their own solution. They built a massive levee on the island to protect the Tabasco factory and family land from future storm surges. Such a project requires a lot of private funding and political connections or support. The corps of engineers and federal wetland protection legislation make it almost impossible for an individual to be allowed to build a levee. An owner from a South-Louisiana alligator farm was able to build a levee around his property only because he executed the entire project himself. And even then he had to argue with federal agencies like the corps of engineers. "They said I couldn't build the levee because it required cutting down trees that were part of the 'natural environment'. My family planted those trees in the past!

The changing environment and the increasing risks require a different set of strategies for the maintenance and protection of homes as well. One of the strategies focuses on the elevation of homes. In the previous chapter the importance of raising a home in a Special Flood Hazard Zone became clear. Not only is elevation needed in order to be eligible for insurance, in those zones marked as high risk, elevation is mandatory. In moderate-risk zones elevation becomes common as well. There are many options for elevating a home, each varying in cost and with its own (dis-) advantages. Some homes are more expensive to lift than others due to building materials (brick home versus a house made out of wood), location or required height of the elevation. "Homes in Delcambre that had been elevated to approximately 13 feet above sea level as part of their rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Rita in 2005, stood above the flood waters. Brick homes that were gutted and the interiors rebuilt after Hurricane Rita, but not elevated, were flooded again. Many home owners felt it was too expensive to elevate brick homes damaged by Hurricane Rita. These homes were flooded again by Hurricane Ike, three years after Hurricane Rita³⁹

³⁹ <http://leanweb.org/campaigns/hurricanes-gustav-and-ike/hurricane-ike-damage-assessment-day-2-2.html>



An elevated house is being built behind a damaged house. Photo taken by author

But for some people elevation is not possible. Elevation might be so expensive that it is not an option. In that case families might be forced by the circumstances to move to another place. This might also be the case for people whose homes were damaged by a surge to the point that living there has become hazardous, and residents have no other option than to leave. For a number of elderly people elevation is no solution either. When a home gets raised by a number of feet, it means that a number of stairs have to be placed in order to enter the house. This may not be a problem for the elderly who are still in a good physical condition, but for others this may be problematic. In these cases moving to another place seems again like the only possible option. One might think reading about moving that the choice shouldn't be too hard, after all, moving seems to be an answer to many of the problems and risks. In this research I found that this proposed solution is not so logical for the Cajuns living in Louisiana. This has to do with the Cajun history, culture and community feeling I discussed in chapter two. I will further elaborate on this subject in the next paragraph.

4.3 Community

When environmental circumstances are worsening to the point where human habitation becomes a social and political point of discussion, a common reaction is looking for possibilities for relocation of the affected residents. This is always a difficult and painful issue to the affected people, but in the case of Cajun communities this issue is even more intense. In many societies, moving from one city to another is a common thing to do. But in ‘Cajun Country’ there seems to be a strong community- and family feeling. There is also a feeling like ‘we are not like the Americans. We are Cajuns. We look after ourselves and each other.’ In New Orleans many people who could have done something themselves after hurricane Katrina were said to wait for the government for help and money, when most Cajuns started the cleanup themselves. Before the work began, neighbours got together to prepare and eat the food from the fridges and freezers that would otherwise go to waste because of the lack of electricity. “After the surge, people helped each other out. People spontaneously started barbecuing with the things they could round up in de area, the things to have were charcoal and beer. After that, everybody worked together to start cleaning up the debris caused by the surge. The people and their ancestors have had to pick themselves up before, and they did it again instead of complaining about it. After Rita, people just finished rebuilding when Ike hit and many rebuilt again. These are some resilient people”.⁴⁰

Another reason why moving is not considered a real option has to do with the inheritance of land. Many families nowadays live on the same land their ancestors have lived on for generations. It is a part of the family inheritance which needs to be protected. Sometimes when a landowner fears one of his children does not share this same sentiment, a will is changed to prevent this heritage from being split or sold. In cases where people do consider moving or are forced to do so because of the circumstances, they have nowhere to go. Properties at risk for floods are impossible to sell, so few people are able to buy or even rent another property.

Another issue is that few people would be willing to give up their safety nets. In spite of the risks the surge brings, the Cajun community feeling acts as a strong protector when times are bad. Families live close together because of the way the land was passed on from generation to generation, and different families ‘go way back’. Personal feelings don’t even matter in times of need, everybody helps each other out. Many interviews showed that after a

⁴⁰ Interview Paul Neal 23-02

disaster, communities get together to share food and water, and help clean up the neighbourhood. “In Florida they were selling gallons of water off the back of a pickup truck, for 25 dollars a gallon. I’ve never heard of any cunasses doing that, Cajuns. Of actually doing that around here, I’ve never heard of it. I don’t know, I’ve never actually seen anybody doing that. At times like that people usually help each other out.”⁴¹

References to ancestors were often made when respondents talked about the ways in which many Cajuns are trying to deal with the environmental threats. Many people knew exactly which ancestors came to Louisiana, when they came and how hard they had to work in order to survive in and near the wetlands. Hank, a cattle and horse rancher told me⁴² that his great grandfather came to Louisiana with hardly any belongings except for a mule and some small hand tools. If his family was able to survive in the past with so little resources, he felt he had to be able to do the same. Even more so because nowadays the machinery and options for rebuilding are much better. “My relatives still live close to each other on large pieces of land. It’s your sweat, your blood. Plus: where do you go? If people are willing to fight, why would they move?”⁴³

A short comment has to be made regarding younger generations. BG LeBlanc AUS (ret.) made a remark⁴⁴ about the fact that these generations seem more inclined to move from the areas that were hit by the surges. “The younger people do not want to (re-) build over there, they’re moving further north to build their homes. So it’s affecting the culture that we have here. For years and years of hunting, fishing, trapping and grazing. Practically all of the seafood that is utilized in the United States, at least about 70 percent of it comes out of this marshland here.” I will return to the subject of the younger generations moving in the epilogue.

⁴¹ Interview Clyde 13-04

⁴² Interview 23-02

⁴³ Informal conversation Paul Neal 23-02

⁴⁴ Interview 11-03

4.4 Coping Economically; Agriculture and Livelihood

After hurricane Rita many Cajuns still had the hope that the disaster was a once-in-a-lifetime event. Hurricane Ike transformed that hope into fear of the possibility that hurricanes accompanied by surges might be part of a new reality in Southern Louisiana. After Rita, many people making a living in the agricultural sector worked hard to transform the affected land into arable land once again. Fresh water was used to flush out the salt from the rice fields, crawfish ponds and pastures. Fences were rebuilt, ponds restocked and rice replanted. When Ike hit three years later, many farmers realized they had to come up with other alternatives to ensure income even when another storm surge would hit. One strategy is to try to work around hurricane season intensifying crops or other activities of which the harvest season does not overlap with hurricane season. Brian⁴⁵ told me that rice can be harvested twice a year. The first harvest usually has the largest yield, and this harvest generates an income that can cover expenses. The second harvest, the ratoon crop, is during hurricane season. The ratoon crop generates the profit where the first crop breaks even. This means that in case a hurricane hits the ratoon crop, expenses made are still covered even if no profit is made. Crawfish season does not overlap with hurricane season either⁴⁶. Farmers are therefore less vulnerable to a hurricane, because the profit from the crawfish ponds is already made when hurricane season starts. This does not mean a hurricane will not have an impact. Crawfish are held in shallow ponds, where adult crawfish breed and ensure next generations to be harvested. When the crawfish ponds flood, salt water might kill the initial stock, or they might be washed out of the ponds into ditches and channels where they are lost to the farmer. Another strategy is to buy calves outside of the hurricane season, and sell them (to the Midwest) before it starts again. “It is the only way to utilize the land here. I had to change my program. Horses were a part of my business operation, but I had to make it a great part of my income. My plan was to work towards retirement, but after Rita I had to invest in rebuilding. I used my savings to invest in the land, the house was put on hold for later. I had to go back to training horses, which is hard work. This might be the last time I try to start over”.⁴⁷

Many Cajuns in Vermilion Parish seem to never really completely retire. I encountered numerous people who were still working in one way or another at 68, 88 or 72 years old. The same goes for cattle ranchers, who will usually keep living and working on the

⁴⁵ Interview 12-03

⁴⁶ Interview Cliff 30-03

⁴⁷ Informal conversation Hank 09-03

land where they were born and raised. But the hurricane surges limit the possibilities to keep working. Maintaining a ranch or having to rebuild makes a big difference for people reaching the age of retirement “I was raised working cows, and my family had cattle all their lives and in fact this year is the first year in 57 years that I do not have a cow. I had to sell them. You see what happened, after Rita, We had this wave action and the water, and it destroyed all our fencing. We had fencing surrounding our property and cross fences to keep the cattle on your property. So we had to repair all that. I had to sell my cattle. Before the hurricane I had 60 cows. I sold just about all of them and I had to sell them all at a decreased price. So the following year, I bought some more and I was just ready to buy some more, and here comes Ike. And the same thing happens again, knocked all of our fences, brand new fencing that we had just put up, so I had to sell my cattle again. When Ike came in I had 30. I had already reduced. Because agewise, and healthwise it was beginning to get difficult. So last fall I sold the last of the cows.”⁴⁸

There are also quite a few Cajuns living in Louisiana who work for oil companies or oil-related companies like pipeline construction or drilling companies. As Bob said⁴⁹, the oil industry in Louisiana has brought both profit and problems. The downside of oil-related activity was discussed in previous chapters, but the oil industry also provided a lot of Cajuns living in Southern Louisiana with jobs. After the hurricanes and surges people working in the oil industry were soon able to get back to work. Others who were severely affected by the surge hope to make a profit through the oil industry as well. Hank, the horse and cattle rancher who was devastated and had to rebuild twice, might finally get lucky too. Geographers are researching a part of his property as there might be oil to be found under his land. Even though the oil industry has been one of the contributors to ‘Cajun Country’s vulnerable position, in Hank’s case it might also be the only solution to ensure the maintenance of his way of life.

⁴⁸ Interview Austin 12-03

⁴⁹ Interview Bob 23-03

Chapter 5: Conclusion

For decades the Cajuns have had to struggle for the survival of their culture. They were exiled in Nova Scotia and looked down upon in Louisiana. When the tides finally seemed to have changed to the advantage of Cajuns and Cajun Culture, a new threat presented itself for Cajuns living in coastal Louisiana. The devastating impact of storm surges which accompanied hurricanes Rita and Ike showed that Cajuns living near the coast are still in a vulnerable position. Stopping or reversing the erosion of the wetlands might reduce this vulnerability, but there are many other factors contributing to the vulnerable position besides the wetland's deteriorating condition. Red tape or bureaucracy, which is inherent to the United States political system, slows down any attempts to reduce vulnerability. Many political or economical power holders have other interests than protecting communities along the coast. Extraction of oil and commercial shipping in Louisiana seem to have priority over local residents and the ecological system. New laws and regulations created by the federal and state government are supposed to protect coastal residents, but often they accomplish the opposite, thus increasing vulnerability. Mandatory insurance with its strict requirements for the alteration of homes might be expensive, or might force residents to relocate because of physical inability to inhabit an altered home. Because of the importance of agriculture for Vermilion parish as a significant part of the economy, storm surges have a large and long lasting impact on Vermilion communities.

If the above would be the final conclusion, the outlook for people living in Vermilion parish would not be hopeful. But the Cajuns of Vermilion parish have a strong will, and passion for the protection and maintenance of their culture and way of life. As one of the respondents said in an interview; "these are some resilient people". After hurricane Rita most Cajuns immediately started to clean up and rebuild. Deep roots, a strong realization of the challenges ancestors had faced, and community spirit, transformed the disaster into a challenge that had to be dealt with. Some people were forced to move because of circumstances; financial or health reasons for example. But if circumstances left space for a glimmer of hope, houses and ranches were cleaned up or rebuilt. New ways are sought in order to cope with the environmental changes and challenges. Growing crops outside of the hurricane season, selling cattle before the hurricanes start to become frequent and lifting houses are all ways to minimize the risk of damage done by a surge without having to

relocate. Material items are convenient but not an essential in life. As Miss Dee said; “We are basic people from way back. We are not materialistic because we built everything with our own hands. You can’t take any of it with you. If you pass, somebody else gotta dust it off”. What is cherished among Cajuns in Vermilion Parish is the proximity of family, a connected community, good food shared with family and friends, *la joie de vivre* or the joy of life, and the historical tie to the land. The trouble is, when a situation demands relocation, material items can be taken along but many things cherished most by the Cajuns cannot. Therefore fighting and rebuilding are often chosen over giving up. Throughout history, life has always brought the Cajuns challenges, and so far they were always able to fight back

Epilogue

In the introduction I said the reader would likely end up with more questions after reading this thesis. This is exactly what happened to me after I finished my research in Vermilion Parish. Significant research can be done concerning Cajuns and Cajun culture in Louisiana, as well as research on US politics and power relations impacting environmental change and efforts to put a stop to these changes. Because of the complexity and urgency of the situation, more information is needed in order to protect the Cajuns living in Southern Louisiana. Locals, politicians, ecologists and commercial companies will have to work together to make a difference.

Some interviews indicated that although most people are keen on staying in the community they were raised in, and keeping up family land, farms, ranches and businesses, younger generations do not seem to have the same desires. Many young people choose a university study over family business, and are less tied to a specific community, parish or even state. Austin told me he even advised his children against taking over family business. Having a cattle ranch becomes more risky because of the possibility of another surge.” I advised them not to take over the farm before the hurricanes got serious, I told especially one of the boys, who wanted to farm. So I told him; why don’t you go to college. After you get out of college, we will see how things go. So he went, and got his degree and before he graduated he had a job lined up in Houston, Texas, with a major oil company. And since then, he worked for oil companies for a while and now he’s in another business in Baton Rouge. And he’s doing so much better than if he would have farmed”.⁵⁰

Globalization seems to make the vulnerable position of people involved in agriculture even bigger. Louisiana now has to compete with other countries in the national and world market, as many other countries export products like beef cattle, rice, sugarcane and cotton. Even crawfish is being imported into the United States from China, though the Cajuns say the flavour is not nearly as good as the Louisiana crawfish. With Agriculture as an important aspect of Cajun culture, these changes might prove to be yet another challenge for Louisiana’s Cajuns.

Another question that remains is about the United States political system. In what ways does the interaction between the different federal, state and parish levels of organisation affect recovery after a hurricane? And how do they affect attempts to change the deteriorating

⁵⁰ Interview Austin 12-03

environmental organisation? And what will it take for the rest of Louisiana and the United States to become concerned with the situation in coastal Louisiana? Some respondents told me a category five hurricane could cause a surge strong enough to reach Lafayette. They believe that it might take such a disaster for people to realize the gravity of the situation. For the rest of the United States to become concerned they would have to feel the consequences themselves. As one of the respondents said; a significant part of the oil comes from and is transported through Louisiana soil. The same goes for seafood, the majority of seafood consumed in the US comes from Louisiana. 'We are keeping them warm in the winter and we are feeding them'. During one of the last weeks of my research period a BP oil rig exploded causing massive amounts of crude oil to leak into the Gulf of Mexico. It is now four months later, and the leak finally seems to be fixed. Nevertheless, the oil which is currently still floating in the gulf, might pose yet another threat to the delicately balanced ecosystem of the wetlands.

I hope this thesis will be a starting point for people to start asking questions and become motivated to take on the Cajun cause. The questions which were raised in this thesis might encourage others to think about the situation, and working together we might find solutions to the environmental problems that are currently threatening Cajuns living in southern Louisiana.

Glossary

Police Jury	The governing body of a parish
Red Tape	Bureaucracy
Bayou	A slow moving river
Coulee	A small stream or canal
Crawfish	A small freshwater lobster-like crustacean
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
USACE	The United States Army Corps of Engineers
Parish	County
NFIP	In 1968, Congress created the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) to help provide a means for property owners to financially protect themselves. The NFIP offers flood insurance to homeowners, renters, and business owners if their community participates in the NFIP. Participating communities agree to adopt and enforce ordinances that meet or exceed FEMA requirements to reduce the risk of flooding ⁵¹
Base flood	The flood having a one percent chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This is the regulatory standard also referred to as the "100-year flood." The base flood is the national standard used by the NFIP and all Federal agencies for the purposes of requiring the purchase of flood insurance and regulating new development ⁵² .
High-risk areas (Special Flood Hazard Area or SFHA).	High-risk areas have at least a 1% annual chance of flooding, which equates to a 26% chance of flooding over the life of a 30-year mortgage. All homeowners in these areas with mortgages from federally regulated or insured lenders are required to buy flood insurance ⁵³

⁵¹ http://www.floodsmart.gov/floodsmart/pages/about/nfip_overview.jsp

⁵² http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/floodplain/nfipkeywords/base_flood.shtm

⁵³ http://www.floodsmart.gov/floodsmart/pages/flooding_flood_risks/defining_flood_risks.jsp

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