

A brake on the ongoing destruction

Rich Heffern | Jun. 22, 2010



Steve Landry (NCR photo/Rich Heffern)

FRANKLIN, LA. -- In coastal Louisiana, a fierce love of place cuts across lines of class, race and religion.

Steve Landry, Catholic, Cajun, fisherman, lives in Franklin, a town that straddles the Bayou Teche near Vermilion Bay on the Gulf. He shares both his fishing grounds and neighborhood with a gumbo of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, African-American, Native American, Caribbean and Hispanic fishers and boat and dock workers.

Landry praised the Native and Asian fishers for the innovative, earth-friendly ways they fish, the care they take to exclude turtles and other sea life from their nets. "Their wives go out to take care of the turtles. 'Don't mess with the turtles,' they say."

Since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, life has gotten a lot tougher for Louisiana's fishers, who were already struggling with overharvesting, expensive fuel and weak seafood prices, not to mention a series of severe hurricanes starting with Katrina in 2005.

"Gone Fishing" signs, normally on doors at this time, are now mostly stashed at home but Landry still goes out every morning at 5 a.m. to check and bait his crawfish traps.

"We've seen oil in the water before and reported it," Landry said, "but it was never anything like this could be. All of us are praying that oil doesn't get into the marshes, where the soil's like coffee grounds and will quickly absorb and hold it."

Landry said that commercial fishing was already in deep trouble before the Deepwater Horizon spill.

After years spent as a farmer raising sugar cane, he started fishing in 1985, buying a small shrimp vessel and then also building in his backyard his own boat for catching crawfish.

"When I first went out into the marshes and canals here, I would see all kinds of wildlife -- bears, raccoons, water snakes, blue herons, snowy egrets, pelicans, ducks, alligators -- and the fishing was good. Little by little it

has all disappeared. I used to find a snake in about one out of every 10 traps, now nothing. Even the mosquito numbers are down.

"When a Louisiana fisher is out at 6 a.m. in the summer and doesn't get bit on the neck, something is dead wrong. I'd like to see a few mosquitoes again."

He describes the demise of plant life as well — lilies, iris and cattails, mosses, wild muscadine grapes and blackberries. "You used to just shake the vines and the berries would fall into your boat."

On the Gulf Coast, commercial fishers, Landry said, are the eyes on the environment and its animal life, and a brake on the ongoing destruction.

"I'd like to throw all the oil company CEOs in jail, I guarantee, but you can't blame them for all of this. What's brought the fishing down is cheaper product available from foreign markets, pollutants being dumped in the waters, and straight channels dug by oil and gas companies in the marshes and swamps for exploration."

Landry has fought an ongoing battle with the Louisiana Fish and Wildlife Department over their spraying of pesticides on the lily pads that choke waterways.

He invented a device that's affixed to the front of his crawfish boat for cutting the lily pads. "I called the state, offered them my cutter. They sternly replied, 'We have our own way to deal with it' — and that method is spraying herbicides that kill not only the plants but also the wildlife."

Franklin was hit hard in 2008 by Hurricane Gustav, followed by Ike. The Landrys' black-and-white cat is named after the first infamous storm. Linda Landry said the cat turned up lost in her sister's yard, "a little blown off course."

The crude oil has not yet entered Vermilion Bay south of Franklin where much of the fishing is done. Landry worries about big summer storms driving the sticky oil up into the marshes and swamps, finally finishing the ongoing destruction.

There is even talk of oil-laden rains coming. "We're gonna need Tide in our windshield washer fluid then," Landry joked.

"Sure makes life interesting," Landry mused. "When I get up in the morning now I expect about anything to happen."

He's still able to drop his boat into the nearby canal and head south toward the Gulf early each day.

"I'm not alone though. God is out there too."



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