

The NewStandard Gulf Coast Tribes Face Erosion, Lack of Aid

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by *Andrew Stelzer*

Native Americans in Southern Louisiana, still suffering from Hurricane Rita's destruction, recount how wetland disappearance leaves them ever more vulnerable to storms.

Pointe-Au-Chien, Louisiana; Mar. 17 – More than six months after Hurricane Rita flooded many of their homes, members of four Native American tribes on Louisiana's coast are struggling to rebuild and survive.

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With the 2006 hurricane season approaching and their land disappearing, the Pointe-Au-Chien Tribe, along with three member tribes of the Biloxi-Chitimacha Confederation of Muskogees (BCCM), have begun pooling their resources to try and make up for a lack of state and federal aid.

Albert Naquin, chief of the Isle de Jean Charles band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha, said Rita flooded 30 of his tribe's 52 homes; and two are permanently destroyed. At first, he said, some people who could not afford hotels and didn't

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[Andrew Stelzer](#) is a contributing journalist.

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want to stay at shelters just put blankets over their wet mattresses and stayed home.

FEMA trailers have just begun to trickle into the area, and even those are often unusable because some tribe members cannot afford the required sewer system.

"If you can't afford an updated sewage system, well then you don't get your FEMA trailer," explained Naquin. As a result, "the people are living in a house, basically which is condemned. They live in this house with mold growin' in it, but they have no place to go."

Randy Verdun, chief of the Bayou Lafourche Band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha, living about an hour and a half Southwest of New Orleans, said that immediately following Rita the Red Cross came in with food, and the National Guard put tarps on some people's roofs. But since September, he said, the only steady assistance with cleaning up, repairing and rebuilding of homes in his community has come from volunteers with Mennonite Disaster Services, which has established a volunteer project location in Pointe-Au-Chien.

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Individual tribe members can apply for aid from FEMA, but because the Gulf Coast tribes are not federally recognized, they are not eligible for federal aid as groups. While they do receive some state aid – Louisiana recognized the BCCM and Pointe-Au-Chien in 2004 – locals suspect part of their fair share is being withheld. Marlene Foret, chairwoman of the Grand Caillou Dulac band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha, told *The NewStandard*, "Everything is being focused on New Orleans because New Orleans has a lot of resources."



Even obtaining basic necessities has been a challenge for local residents. The single large grocery store in the area has closed permanently, and many of the shrimp factories are not re-opening. Foret said she believes the government is "saying for us to leave and not come back."

Foret said the benefits that come with federal recognition, such as scholarships and healthcare, would free up some of the community's money to invest in much-needed small businesses related to tourism or seafood processing. The four tribes are hoping to receive word on their applications for federal recognition by late 2006 or early next year. The Pointe-Au-Chien first submitted its petition in 1996, the BCCM one year earlier.

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The Pointe-Au-Chien tribe had 35 homes damaged by wind and another 35 damaged by flooding. Despite doctors' orders, many people chose to stay in their moldy homes because they had no safer place to go.

Many of the chiefs say they think the flooding and damage could have been prevented if the natural wetland marshes surrounding their homes had been better preserved.

They tell how the levees built on the Mississippi River in the 1920s and the canals that oil companies dug through the marshes damaged the wetlands, bringing in more saltwater and causing erosion of the barrier islands. Without sediment deposits flowing in from the Mississippi, chiefs say, the land could not rebuild itself.

"You get the saltwater coming in through those canals, it starts eating away at the marsh land, and basically it just starts falling into the Gulf," explained Chuckie Verdin, chairman of the Pointe-Au-Chien tribe. "There's no vegetation there to hold the land together, so you just get this massive land loss. And what used to be further south, it's crept and crept up and up to the point where it's knocking on the back door."



Now after each big storm that hits the area, like Hurricanes Juan in 1985 and Andrew in 1992, people build their homes a few feet higher than the water line. But each successive storm, facing less of a physical barrier, brings higher water.

"You used to have a barrier or a buffer zone between us and the storm; we are the buffer zone now," said Chief Verdun of the Bayou Lafourche Band. "I don't know if it'll ever be like it was," he said.

The lack of fresh water has also led to the disappearance of crawfish, and

saltwater seeps under the land, killing trees at their roots.

"What used to be where my grandfather had cows and had a house and had chickens and had a yard and everything," said Chief Verdun "now you have dead oak trees, and everything around it is dead, because the salt water's eating it away. It's like a cancer. And until you do some serious chemotherapy, it's not gonna stop."

For his part, Chairman Verdin says the only thing that could help is the fortification of the barrier islands, along with construction of levees to break the storm surge before it reaches the Bayou. He suggests that even covering the barrier islands with rocks and sand, or jury rigging levees next to those islands out of old abandoned ships, would be better than nothing.

The Terrebonne Parish Levee Priority Advisory Committee estimated that it would take up to ten years and cost \$70–80 million to build new levees and bring all portions of their existing levee system to an elevation of ten feet.

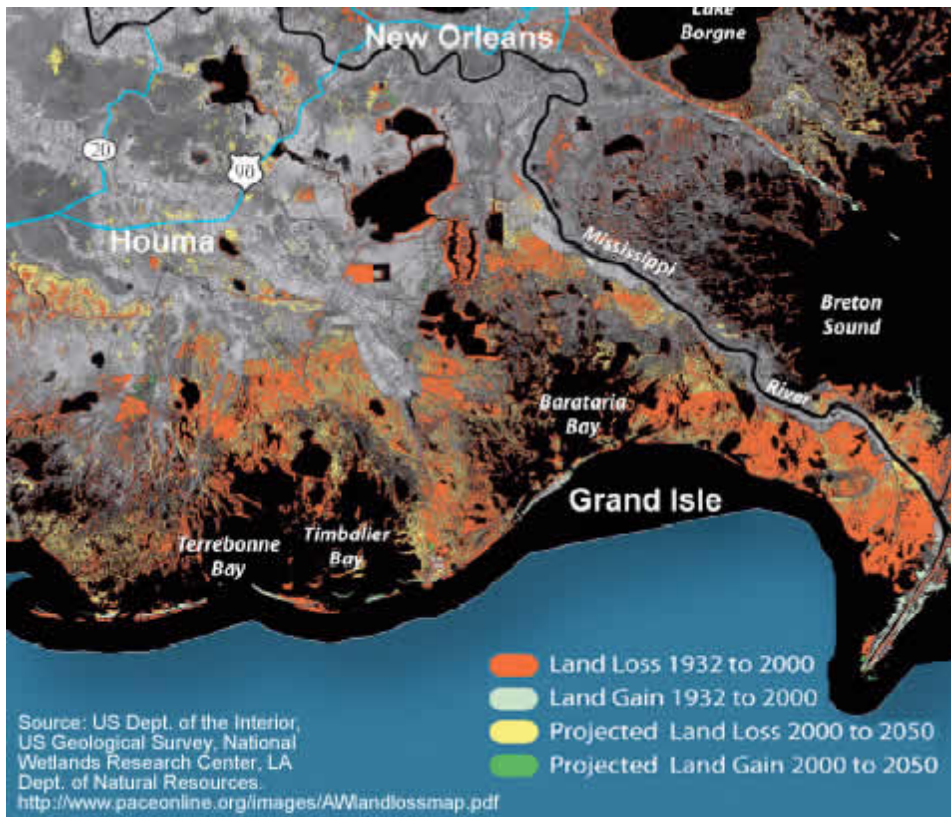
Although the Houma Terrebonne Chamber of Commerce's website brags that "a rich Native American tradition continues to maintain a strong presence in this area," Chief Verdun says not much is being done by the local or state governments to preserve that tradition. "I still don't believe there's an interest in the state to participate in the preservation of our people," he said. "They've talked about coastal erosion for decades, and nothing has ever really been done."

Oil companies have also taken over major areas of land since the 1920s, from natives who lacked the resources to stop them. "A lot of this land where people used to fish, now they can't go there anymore," said Chairman Verdin. "People try to go on, but [the oil companies] threaten them with being arrested or being kicked out; you have a lot of fights over land issues."

A lone bright spot in post-Rita rebuilding is cooperation between the tribes for the first time. The BCCM and the Pointe-Au-Chien have set up a nonprofit organization to accept donations and pool their resources. They say contributions to a shared fund end up helping whichever family needs it most,

regardless of their tribal affiliation. The chiefs of the tribes have also been meeting at least once a month at Live Oak Baptist church in Pointe-Au Chien, which serves as a chance to collectively speak with Mennonite Disaster Services volunteers, FEMA representatives or local government officials, and respond to new developments collectively.

"We keep hoping that something good's gonna happen," said Chairman Verdin. "I know I do."



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