

# Bringing Back Bayou Bienvenue

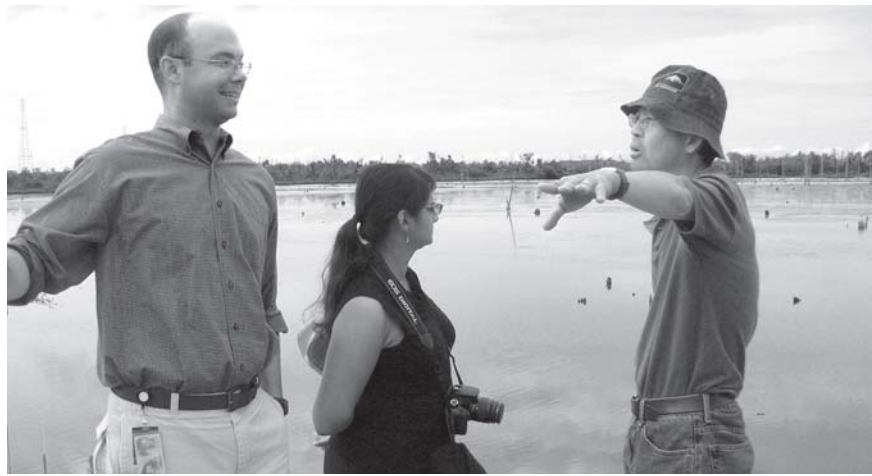
by Maitri Venkat-Ramani

Many New Orleanians have never seen Bayou Bienvenue just north of the Lower Ninth Ward. They don't know that at the end of town that is Florida Avenue, across the railroad tracks and behind a floodwall begins what used to be a thriving cypress swamp that works its way eastward to Lake Borgne, forming the northern geographic boundary of St. Bernard Parish. "Used to" as the swamp has turned into a brackish cesspool since its bisection by the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) in the late 1950s and early '60s and the introduction of seawater.

It is common conjecture that the Lower Ninth Ward was completely devastated by the floodwall breaches after Hurricane Katrina, and that the area has languished for the last 2.5 years. This is true to some extent given the ferocity of the localized flooding, ensuing devastation and overall snail's pace of recovery in New Orleans. The Lower Ninth Ward is far from dead, however. Thanks to the concern and cooperation of residents and environmental activists, the Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement & Development (CSED) was created along with an environmentally-friendly plan for recovery. This plan recognizes and includes the need for the restoration of the swamp at the headwaters of Bayou Bienvenue.

In July of 2007, I got a glimpse of this vast and awe-inspiring body of water, along with the work being done to save it thanks partly to the UW-Madison. At the behest of CSED and the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board (S&WB), the UW's Bayou Bienvenue-Central Wetland Unit practicum has begun to study the feasibility of rehabilitating the wetland and the cypress forest through the introduction of the end products of treated sewage.

Laura Craig, Ashleigh Ross, Andy Baker and their leader, Professor Herb Wang, referred to that time as the summer of the baseline due to the then lack of (reliable) spatial and (any) environmental data on the swamp. They talked with me of discovering little cypress trees that grow despite the odds, and showed me pictures of herons, kites and a variety of swamp birds I can't name. Surrounded by the Industrial Canal, illegal dumping along Almonaster Avenue to the north, the adjacent S&WB sewage treatment plant and intruding seawater, it is surprising anything survives there. Therefore, another major goal of CSED is to establish a nature center, which will showcase the area's natural and



**Shell's Dave Schaper and Maitri Venkat-Ramani, and Professor Herb Wang on the floodwall separating the Lower Ninth Ward and the Bayou Bienvenue wetland. (Courtesy of Herb Wang)**

cultural history.

Standing on the banks of the swamp, we were at sea level. Climbing back down *eleven feet* to the level of Florida Avenue, I knew that the Lower Ninth Ward used to be another cypress swamp but found out that that swamp was *slightly higher than sea level*. Once it was drained in the late 1800s and early 1900s to put in streets and houses for the working poor, the swamp soil compacted until the entire area descended well below sea level. In fact, the part of the swamp we looked at was slated for draining, too, but later left alone. It's hard to stomach the disaster that was waiting to happen for decades: continued human construction with a short-term focus and poorly-maintained levees and pumps destroyed the entire Lower Ninth Ward, both parts above and below sea level. Just like that, a largely black-American neighborhood was almost wiped off the face of the earth in the year 2005, but for the resilience of a group of determined residents and help from outside.

The Bring Back Bayou Bienvenue project deals with a specific recovering neighborhood and its bayou. As mentioned earlier, it is a feasibility study, which exists to find out if a bayou can recover while surrounded by shipping channels and attendant seawater incursion, and whether the products of sewage treatment can help remediate the damage. A January phone conversation with Ashleigh Ross revealed that mapping continues and that the wastewater remediation trial will not occur until the summer of this year. Should the trial not succeed and saltwater remains in the swamp, the practicum will research and experiment with alternatives to make a viable wetland.

If this research project does anything, it advocates for the return of the bayou and introduces phrases like "environmental focus" and "sustainable living" into this city's vocabulary. I don't know of any other New Orleans neighborhoods that are attempting to rebuild in such a progressive manner.

Speaking of other neighborhoods, most of Lakeview, a wealthy and badly-flooded subdivision to the northwest of Orleans Parish, is farther below sea level than the Lower Ninth Ward. Few have questioned the rebuilding of Lakeview to the same extent they do that of a poorer and more black neighborhood to the east. Granted, no one wants to see such suffering again, regardless of race or income, but America has to understand that there is a strong racial and economic bias at play in this city and its recovery. Lopsided questioning like this is precisely why it is crucial to get scientific and social assumptions right before passing judgment and policy.

As a New Orleanian and a scientist, I see no problem with this shot at the sustainable redevelopment of an area to which former residents have chosen to return. It's not for us to decide the right or wrong when they bear the brunt of the insurance and re-flooding risks. It is, however, only proper to help and educate after they have taken the situation into their own hands and have requested aid. Come what may, New Orleans and every coastal city on this planet has lessons to learn. The University of Wisconsin, or any other research institution, can only stand to learn and teach these lessons and to participate in an exercise of such scope and urgency.

Much gratitude to the UW-Madison Water Resources Management team for spending their time down here and working to restore a part of this area's natural environment. You are welcome any time. ***Bienvenue!***

***The author, a geophysicist with Shell Exploration and Production Company, is a member of the department's Board of Visitors. She is president of the New Orleans chapter of the Wisconsin Alumni Association. An avid photojournalist, she maintains a blog <vatul.net/blog>, which focuses in part on the recovery of New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina and the Flood of 2005.***