



Smithsonian



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About the WaterWays Film Series

[*Born on the Bayou*](#) is one of four films in the WaterWays series. Additional WaterWays films include [*Diversions*](#), [*Keepers of the Mound*](#), and [*Station 15*](#). The series title suggests rivers, bayous, and the ocean, but it also invites us to ponder the ways that water is meaningful in our lives and our communities, and the folkways and other ways of life that are affected by water and its over- or underabundance.

While the films consider specific issues regarding bodies of water in South Louisiana and the rainfall that feeds them, they raise more general issues about the human relationship with nature and our evaluation of what is important to us in our own communities, as well as at state, national, and even global levels.

The WaterWays films are made possible by a grant to the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities from the Walton Family Foundation to support a multi-year initiative to document the issues facing Louisiana's coast.

Look for these humanities themes as you watch the WaterWays films:

- Classic struggles: humanity versus nature and humanity versus technology
- Justice: Whose rights are most important in issues of water management?
- Identity: How do we define ourselves by where we live and what we do?
- History: What role does the past play in our planning for the future?
- Responsibility: Whose job is it to fix problems arising from water management issues? Who should fund the technological interventions deemed necessary to manage our waterways?
- Community: What role does water management play in the communities depicted in the films and in our own local communities?

- Civics: How are these local, state, and/or national issues? What voice or power does a community have in a national or global context? Who represents these local interests?
- Safety: What power do we have over our own safety in the face of nature's potentially greater power?

Explore these questions as you begin the WaterWays series and with each film:

- What role does nature play in our lives? Is it useful, decorative, exploitable, precious? Why?
- In the [trailer](#) introducing the series, Richie Blink says that the marshes of South Louisiana are “my classroom, my playground, my sanctuary.” Would you say this about a natural area in your hometown or where you grew up? What would it be like if you lost such an area to natural disaster or other event?
- Blink says that the loss of land in South Louisiana is “the ecological crisis of our time.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- How is water a hazard? How is it a resource?
- Is technological intervention in natural processes always appropriate? If not, when is it appropriate?
- How complicit are humans in natural changes like erosion?
- How do we balance public versus private good: that is, what are the rights and responsibilities of those who seek to make a profit versus the rights and responsibilities those who don't?
- What issues of justice are implied in our interventions in nature—what tradeoffs must be discussed or managed?
- Do individuals have a right to profit from the land/ocean or associated resources?
- Who does the ocean belong to? The rivers and bayous?
- Have we been good stewards of our natural resources?

- What role does the land and water around us play in our identity? Our history? Our future?
- What is the relationship between ecological crisis and economic disaster? What economic changes can we expect with environmental changes?
- Why should the rest of the nation care about what happens in coastal Louisiana?

Born on the Bayou

Born on the Bayou

Directed by Kevin McCaffrey
2017; 23 min.

Summary

Windell Curole grew up on the waters of Bayou Lafourche. Not only has he always lived there, he has devoted his life to protecting the people and small bayou towns that make up his world. For over 35 years, he has been intimately involved in the planning and implementation of projects that are helping to saving coastal Louisiana. Windell takes us on a journey through his parish, introducing us to his neighbors and the public works along the levee that have been critical in preserving his home and culture.

Discussion Questions

1. Is there too much focus on technology in this film? Does it help us understand the issue or get in the way?
2. The film begins with footage of an interview with Daize Cheramie, who was filmed in 1988 talking about his early childhood memory of the effects of the Chenière Caminada Hurricane of 1893 (this was before storms were given specific names). Why does the filmmaker choose to begin the film in this way? What is the effect of this introduction on what comes later in the film?
3. Why do we start this film with an oral history interview and footage of a cemetery, as well as reminiscences about how the land/water ratio has changed over the years? Is this emotional appeal more or less effective than tables with facts and figures? Why or why not?
4. Windell Curole makes the case that delta geology is different from other waterway geology. Why does a lack of understanding of the differences between the two cause problems in Washington DC or even in Baton Rouge? Should all decisions about land/water management and use be made on a local level? What role should state and federal governments play in local decisions and why?
5. The alligator farm does not serve the local community. It serves prominent European fashion producers Gucci, Prada, Chanel, and Hermes. Should those companies have a say in the management of local water, as they benefit financially from its control?

Should they contribute financially to water management?

6. The marsh is neither land nor sea. Why is it important, being neither and both?
7. The Mississippi River has been described as the backbone of America. What is more important: the interests of the rest of the country that depend on Port Fourchon and the Mississippi for energy transportation and production, or the interests of the people along Bayou Lafourche, who need fresh water for drinking and technology to protect their properties from flooding? Can both sets of interests be managed and balanced?
8. Windell Curole says at the end of the film that he sees a cultural bias in favor of implementing new technologies instead of using old-fashioned experiential knowledge and common sense. What does he mean? Is he right? Is one better than the other in planning for water management and control?
9. What role does economic benefit play in plans for controlling water? Who stands to benefit and who loses? Is that fair?
10. Bayou Lafourche provides both recreational and economic opportunities. Is one form of use more or less important than the other? Why?

Explore these questions after you've watched all four WaterWays films:

1. After watching all four of these films, do you have a different attitude about coastal erosion, flooding, and water management than you did before watching them? Why?
2. Was there a specific fact, person, or shot that stands out as being particularly powerful?
3. Which film seems most successful in its exploration of the issues? Why?
4. Which is worse, the ecological or the economic crisis caused by the loss of land in South Louisiana? Why?
5. Do these films push an agenda? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
6. What is the effect of the background music in these films?
7. What are the different kinds of visual images of water in these films? Are they of a certain quality or kind? How do they contribute to the story being told in these films?
8. Are all points of view represented in these films, or do they only tell one side of the story? If so, what is that side?
9. How did these films make you feel? Why?

Recommended Reading

These fiction and non-fiction works will help you continue to explore issues of the human relationship to nature and water. Many will be available at your local or school library.

Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America by John M. Barry

Ain't There No More: Louisiana's Disappearing Coastal Plain (America's Third Coast Series) by Carl A. Brasseaux and Donald W. Davis

Losing Ground: Identity and Land Loss in Coastal Louisiana by David M. Burley

The Awakening and "At Cheniere Caminada" by Kate Chopin

Southern Waters: The Limits to Abundance by Craig E. Colten

Atchafalaya Swamp Life Settlement and Folk Occupations by Malcolm L. Comeaux

Washed Away: The Invisible Peoples of Louisiana's Wetlands by Donald W. Davis

A Wetland Biography: Seasons on Louisiana's Chenier Plain by Gay Gomez

The Old Man and The Sea by Ernest Hemingway

A Louisiana Coastal Atlas by Scott A. Hemmerling

Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer

Riverhorse by William Least Heat-Moon

"To Build a Fire" by Jack London

Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore by Elizabeth Rush

Tempest: Hurricane Naming and American Culture by Liz Skilton

Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast by Mike Tidwell