



Smithsonian



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About the WaterWays Film Series

[*Keepers of the Mound*](#) is one of four films in the WaterWays series. Additional WaterWays films include [*Diversions*](#), [*Station 15*](#), and [*Born on the Bayou*](#). 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?

Keepers of the Mound

Keepers of the Mound

Directed by Katie Mathews

1017; 17 min.

Summary

Louisiana's coast is dotted with countless mounds built by indigenous people hundreds of years ago that are now threatened by coastal erosion. The mounds along Bayou Grand Caillou in Terrebonne Parish sit in an endangered marsh on property owned by land developers. In this film, the Solet family, members of the United Houma Nation, fight for access to the sacred space, attending public meetings with state officials, imploring the landowner to save the mounds, and seeking to define the meaning of home and cultural heritage amid a rapidly changing landscape.

Discussion Questions

1. How do the flora and fauna of a region create a sense of identity or place? How do you feel when you see these identifying aspects of nature? How does our environment connect us to home? What are the identifying features of your hometown?
2. Carla Solet says that "people need to recognize where their foundation is." What does she mean? Is she right? If so, how does this recognition impact decisions about the environment? How is it connected to a sense of identity?
3. She also says, "my ancestors won't bother me because I am them." What does this imply?
4. Many of us live far from the lands where our ancestors came from. Does this make us more detached from the land we live on? Do we care less about it if our history is not a part of it?
5. Should the archaeologists Jayur Mehta and Elizabeth Chamberlain be allowed to dig on Bayou Grand Caillou Mound? Why do they need to know its date or identify the artifacts of the people who built it? Will these discoveries make a difference to the Houma Nation? Is archeology important? If so, why?
6. Should a mound like the Bayou Grand Caillou Mound be saved before other areas of land? Is it more valuable than, say, a small town, a school, or an area of productive

fishing water? Who gets to decide which land is more valuable or worth saving? Is the process fair?

7. Mounds are evidence of early human intervention in nature; people carried soil in baskets to create small hills where none had existed before. Is this coastal heritage, now under threat from subsidence, erosion, and flooding, as important as other human structures like roads or bridges? Does their history make them more valuable, or are improvements currently used by the local inhabitants (say, a bridge) more valuable? If you could save only one or the other, which would it be? Why?
8. Should we intervene in nature by recreating lost marshes?
9. What is the connection between marshes and hurricanes?
10. Chuck Perrodin of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority tries to convey a sense of urgency and hope for future recovery of lost land. Looking at the various maps in these films that show how much land is being lost (“a football field an hour”), do you think it is already too late?
11. Creating the marsh will cost \$23 million. Is it worth it? Could that money be better spent on feeding the poor or trying to find a cure for cancer? Why?
12. Is Chief Dardar right about the cost-benefit analysis? Do we really value an endangered species of bird above the homes of people? What makes you think that?
13. Are indigenous people more likely to lose out when different interests come into conflict?
14. Chuck Perrodin described data being fed into computers to create action plans. Are objective, data-driven solutions determined without much human involvement desirable? Why or why not?
15. The filmmaker lets the camera dwell on the “oak tree skeletons,” which indicate where villages and land have been lost to the water. How does camera technique enhance or underscore the film’s subject?

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