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## News



**By Joshua Clark**  
**ConsumerAffairs.Com**

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Cordellville, Louisiana lies at the exact point Hurricane Katrina made landfall. It's now my favorite vacation spot in the world.

Cordellville's only buildings are a small ring of FEMA trailers connected by Chuck Bulot's patio. He built the patio with the few bricks Katrina left of the house he was born in. It's just two hours below my hometown of New Orleans. And life here is good.



Cordellville, La.

"Hey, if I was doing any better, I wouldn't be able to stand it." That's Chuck's common refrain when I ask how he's doing.

He's not being sarcastic. Like last Christmas. I can still picture his grin while he's cleaning a 40-pound catfish half as long as himself as the moon rises red out of the Mississippi River across the street.

The citizens of Cordellville are gathering around him for dinner on his patio. Each brings their own offering from their land and water — oysters, crabs, redfish, speckled trout, a wild boar, and a nutria, a kind of giant swamp rat.

Mike, one of Cordellville's original inhabitants, cuts out the glands from

the skinned nutria's hind legs and stuffs the muscles with finely chopped green and red peppers.

"I broke two ribs in the storm, but I been laughing so hard this last year they can't heal," he says, before sending me into his FEMA trailer to find some cayenne pepper. Spices are all that line his shelves and drawers and all the other spaces where the clutter of his life might have once been.



Mike

Like the others, his trailer's parked on a concrete slab, what was once the foundation of his house. Beneath his trailer his Rat Terrier, Lil Bit, curls up on the foundation where its favorite couch once was. Above Mike's door a wooden sign proudly declares "HOME."

Inside, there's a pot of gumbo simmering on one side of his mattress, oyster stew on the other. "Don't you touch those! They only been cooking two days," he cautions me from outside, where laughter fills a landscape which Katrina once emptied of even a shadow.

#### **Laughter among the ruins**

For over two years now I've been coming down here, and for over two years this laughter has been a source of great frustration to me. I keep thinking it'll stop. But it just won't.

You see, my own neighborhood in New Orleans survived the storm relatively well. So I started driving down here soon after the hurricane for the first time, for a day or two every month, loaded with survivor's guilt, in order to suffer with these neighbors of mine.

But they have made that impossible. They refuse to suffer.

Cordellville is not on a map. It is a new community, and more than that, a frame of mind. You see, down there, *towns* don't really exist anymore.

The name comes from the Cordell furniture store, north of New Orleans, whose corny commercials, starring an Elvis impersonator, repeated constantly after the storm, letting everyone know that the store's inventory was undamaged. And so Cordellville was named after a faraway place where everything is okay.

It lies within Plaquemines Parish, a region known as "The End of the World," because it contains the last 100 miles of the Mississippi River.



Louisiana's disappearing wetlands

Now only a thin tale of land between the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico, Plaquemines, with Cordellville at its center, is the fastest disappearing landmass on Earth. And it is because of this that so many died in my own city of New Orleans.

### Disappearing land

You gotta understand, Louisiana's coast is unlike any other. It has almost no beaches. It's an intricate network of freshwater swamp, marsh and brackish bayous, a unique ecosystem married to a unique culture. In my short time on this planet, having lived and traveled in four continents, I have never met a kinder people. But their culture, with their land, is needlessly vanishing.

Just 130 miles west of Cordellville, the Atchafalaya River is actually building land. Here, a river diversion canal rushes freshwater and sediment into the marsh. Cypress and oak trees hold their line flush with the Gulf's saltwater. Even in winter it rages green and nearly impenetrable.

The ground is so firm, people have recently begun hunting in tennis shoes rather than duck boots. Each time I fly over it in a tiny airplane with whatever pilot I can coax into taking me, he shakes his head beside me because this land doesn't even appear on the plane's navigation system.



But just a dozen miles to the east, the opposite is true.

Where there used to be farm land there are now only patches of marsh like torn scraps of cloth, the occasional row of dead cypress trees like skeleton hands reaches up toward us in the sky, a reminder of the saltwater intrusion which has decimated the swamps so swiftly nothing can adapt, and no mapping company can keep up.

Over the next two hours, as I fly east toward Cordellville, it only gets worse as the few shards of remaining land marble into open water. Until all of a sudden — nothing. We are over Plaquemines Parish, Cordellville a faint collection of trailers, size of a match's flame on the dimming land. And I wonder what Chuck's cooking up tonight.

### The Ghost of Louisiana

Just as Cordellville was Ground Zero for Katrina, so too it is for coastal erosion.

Tonight, up in the air, the setting sun rages crimson, the horizon circling me rimmed with pink, stars burning overhead, the water lit like mercury, the dark sliver of land shining endless debris back at us, such a confluence of nature's beauty and man's destruction I have never seen.

And then, as I look very closely, shivers run up my spine. There are stakes sticking out of the water beneath us. Tens of thousands of them, miles from land.

We take the plane down low and I realize that sure enough they outline what was once land, perhaps stuck there at some intermittent point when it would just barely submerge below high tide.



The ghost of Louisiana

I've never seen a ghost before. But there it is, the ghost of Louisiana, all this water shining silver beneath the dying day. And through it, just ahead, reaches the end of the world's most powerful river, all its force constrained within its levees, the world's largest human creations, as it dumps the sediment of the entire American valley uselessly off the continental shelf into the Gulf.

Drained from 31 states and Canada, this sediment once made southern Louisiana. From the Montana Rockies to the Appalachians, the Dakota plains down through the Ozarks, the deserts of New Mexico to the hills of upstate New York, we live on tiny pieces of every landscape in America.

But now, with levees blocking the addition of new sediment, we sink.

And then the knockout punch: Tens of thousands of miles of channels — dug for oil pipelines and navigation — crisscross the marshes well past the horizon, funneling saltwater into them, decimating them.

As I saw with the Atchafalaya River, the good news is we can build land through river diversion projects. And dredging and depositing sand can restore Louisiana's crucial barrier islands. The science and the engineering is *here, now*. But the policy is not.

If some other country annexed Rhode Island, I, for one, would be pissed. Well, Louisiana's already lost more land than that.

Since 1928, almost one third — over 2,000 square miles — of Louisiana's coast has eroded, fallen into the Gulf of Mexico. And we're still losing one football field of land every 15 minutes. Up to 35 square miles every year, the size of one and a half Manhattans.

I've spent much of the last two years crawling through Katrina's landscape — mangled, mud-crust and mold-filled homes, slabs of concrete, weeds over my head where there used to be yards, the splintered viscera of everyday existence that most people outside Louisiana take for granted — asking myself *Why? Why?*

Why... When arguably not one levee would have failed after Katrina if the wetlands had been there. Storms feed off water. Wetlands slash their surge and gut their energy.

#### **An inconvenient choice**

The choice is simple. We can all cough up another \$200+ billion after the next hurricane. Or we can protect our country's interests, and citizens, by rebuilding its wetlands for a fraction of that.

But let's face it, most of the country is thousands of miles from Cordellville, so why should they give a damn? And reading these words on your PC is fine and dandy, but how can we actually *show* the wetlands to you?

Well, they're right in front of your face. (In fact, they may be *on* your face since our pogie fish are the oil base for cosmetics.)

The seafood you eat doesn't appear at your grocery and favorite restaurant by magic. It's caught in our marshes. The things you buy don't appear in stores by magic. They come through our port. The petroleum in your car doesn't get to the pump by magic. Nor does the natural gas that heats your home. It is drained from our soil.

And the same thing protecting America's oil, gas, seafood and the world's largest port, is the same thing that should protect Cordellville and New Orleans from hurricanes. Wetlands. Make no mistake, their erosion is a dire national security crisis.



Crawfish with FEMA filtered water

#### Feds take the money

Southern Louisiana boasts 28% of the entire US fisheries annual catch, 20% of all domestic oil production, 25% of natural gas, and 88% of our offshore oil and gas. But unlike tax revenues from land-based drilling, most revenues from offshore drilling are not yet allocated to states.

So while our coast supplies the rest of the country with immense federal tax revenues, our ecosystem and homes face obliteration as a consequence.

Six countries' flags have flown over southern Louisiana and it might be argued that those countries have always used us more than we used them. But if America wants to continue doing so, we need our wetlands. And we can have them. For Heaven's sake, if we can send a spaceship to Pluto, we should be able to stop destroying our wetlands.

#### Katrina Fatigue

Residents in Cordellville have all endured previous hurricanes, but with Louisiana's diminished wetlands unable to abate Katrina's fury... Well, let's just say that Loretta was one of the lucky ones.

She found her house in one piece, more or less, two months after the storm. Only problem was that it now lay smack dab in the middle of Cordellville's only road. She stood beside it and told me, "Well, I suppose we oughtta make it a drive-thru daiquiri stand. That way we can service both northbound *and* southbound cars."

Feeling forgotten by the press and the president alike, Cordellville's citizens

#### Hurricane Katrina



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make due with the only band-aid they have: laughter. They've seen the alternative.

"There's this thing they getting in the rest of the country they calling 'Katrina fatigue,'" Chuck tells me as he watches us devour the catfish he sautéed in garlic and butter, garnished with the okra and tomatoes he grows. "Well, we tired of it too. My daddy got so tired of it he caught himself a heart attack and died last month. That's why that trailer is empty. You welcome to sleep in it tonight."

He knows 23 other people who have died since the storm too.

"It's the older people, they can't handle this. After their whole lives, there's suddenly nothing left on this world for them," he says. "The rest of us, we're happy as newborn babies, because we got the same as they do."

With the Mississippi across the street and the Gulf flush with their backyard, they have no choice but to live every day like it's their last. In fact, that's Cordellville's motto: *Live every day like it's your last and we guarantee you'll die a happy man.*

That night, after I can't eat any more, and it's clear that yet again they're simply not going to let me suffer appropriately, I walk into Chuck's father's old trailer and squeeze onto the one empty bunk there, not quite big enough for a grown man, lamenting tomorrow's drive back to the city, a faraway place where there are buildings older than two years.

I know, as always, I will wake continually though the night, the bottoms of my feet aching from pushing against the wall in my sleep, trying futilely to straighten my body out. But I'm getting used to it. Because without immediate wetlands restoration, these trailers, asbestos and all, are coming to my own neighborhood.

I listen to the other three men in the bunks around me, who have become like family now, as they giggle like children who don't want to go to sleep yet.

And for the first time, I give up. I laugh with them.

And sitting here writing these words, I honestly can't even remember what it was about, which of their endless jokes they'd just told. But I do remember the sudden silence when they heard me laughing so hard I began crying, proud to be part of this stubborn colony at the end of the world.

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Joshua Clark, president of Light of New Orleans Publishing LLC, is the author of [Heart Like Water: Surviving Katrina and Life in its Disaster Zone](#).

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