



Resolutions To Action

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Cherish Earth's Wetlands

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EXPERIENCE

Katrina. The word makes me shudder, makes my heart race in fear and rage. I don't remember a lot about the hurricane that day ... just fear, confusion, and hopelessness. After reaching safety through the love and compassion of so many friends and strangers, rage began to consume me as I learned of the horrendous toll on human lives and God's creation, some of which could have been prevented. There are many questions we hadn't seriously considered before then. I hope we do now.

Pogie are famous and infamous. They are full of fine bones and they stink! "Stink like money!" my mother used to say. Pogie (a.k.a. menhaden) make up almost half of the commercial fisheries catch in the US. They grow to adulthood protected in shallow, grass-filled coastal wetlands, feeding on plankton. Moving to open water, they fall prey to cod, bluefish, gulls, terns, and humans. My parents made their living from pogie... Father fishing them, Mother processing them into meal and oil; feed for poultry, livestock, and farmed-fish. I learned

early the value of pogie; more recently, the value of wetlands from which they come.

Remember the song of frogs or the outbursts of mosquitoes from nearby wetlands days after a heavy rain? A recent visit to my old stomping grounds found frogs replaced by children and mosquitoes by water skiers. The wetlands that bordered the river flowing through this growing town have been replaced with landfill for athletic fields and to improve recreation on the river. Amidst a downpour, I return to my home downstream, a community where I still experience croaking frogs and mosquito bites. I am welcomed by the floodwaters from my former home.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Wetlands have been the foundation of coastal and riparian ecosystems for millions of years. They provide nutrients for producers and protective cover and breeding and nursery areas for many animals species. Most are either continuously submerged or intermittently inundated by seasonal flooding or daily/seasonal tides. The dynamic and complex wetland environments vary greatly with countless species

of plants and animals and high concentrations of birds (especially waterfowl), mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrate species. Wetlands also tend to exhibit high genetic diversity within species that increases a species capability to adapt overtime to changes in the environment. The diversity of species and genetic diversity within species make wetlands a virtual cradle of biodiversity.

Since the development of human settlements, wetlands have been recognized for their value in reducing local flooding and enhancing water quality. The trees, grasses, cattails, and spongy soils generally associated with upland wetlands serve as natural flood control,

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slowing and temporarily storing stormwater. These wetlands also filter runoff, allowing sediment to settle out as the water slows and trapping pollutants carried with the runoff. The replacement of natural wetlands with human landscapes has increased localized flooding downstream. Although there is a movement to require land developers to adopt stormwater management practices to lessen downstream flooding, this does little or nothing to restore the richness of natural wetland ecosystems.

Coastal wetlands buffer the impacts of surges of sea water caused by coastal storms. These wetlands absorb wave energy and dissipate water. Coastal wetlands have been filled or dredged for roads, recreational facilities, housing, and other construction. Some are being lost to open water due to channeling and subsidence induced by the extraction of oil and gas. Flow control dams to maintain river commerce and flood control trap sediment removing what, for over millions of years, was the source of natural building material for coastal wetlands. Sea-level rise attributed to climate change in recent years is threatening still more wetland losses. Currently, more than half of the US population lives in coastal counties with continuing growth expected. This trend not only puts increasing pressure on coastal wetland ecosystems, but makes more people, primarily poor people, vulnerable to harm from unbuffered ocean storms.

At the time of European settlement there were about 221 million acres of wetlands in what is now the United States. Today, less than half that area remains. Although the loss of coastal wetlands continues at the rate of 59,000 acres per year, the rate of loss is lessening. Federal and state education and regulations governing the destruction of wetlands are partly responsible, as are community efforts to preserve existing coastal wetlands and restore damaged ones. Additional promise can be seen in the Water Resources Development Act enacted by Congress in November 2007. Among other things, it authorizes the Secretary of the Army to restore

wetlands and directs the secretary to develop a comprehensive coastal area plan for Louisiana which includes the protection, conservation, and restoration of wetlands.

REFLECTION

Since Pope John Paul II delivered *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, in 1989, the Vatican and US bishops draw attention to our moral responsibility to examine how we live in harmony with God's creation and what we pass on to future generations.

Our bishops tell us in *Renewing the Earth* that other species, ecosystems, and even distinctive landscapes give glory to God. The covenant given to Noah was a promise to all the earth. "Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you,...'" (Genesis 9:8-10) Clearly wetland ecosystems are to be cherished.

Our inattentiveness to seeing God revealed in creation, our lack of humility to consider ourselves a part of rather than apart from creation, and our disregard to our call to be co-creators in the continuing unfolding of creation leads to our current and historical abuse of God's creation. "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?" (Ezekiel 34:18)

Our God intends life to thrive on Earth. "And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:20- 22)

ACTION

"...we can either ignore the harm we see and witness further damage, or we can take up our responsibilities to the Creator and creation with renewed courage and commitment." -- *Renewing the Earth*

Personal Action

- Pray in thanksgiving for God's good gifts of creation.
- Pray for the thousands of people suffering from June floods in the Midwest
- Become familiar with scripture and tradition about stewardship and care of creation.
- Learn about local wetlands and coastal areas and help to maintain them.

Advocacy

- Notify your congressional representatives when implementation of the Water Resources Development Act of 2007 is insufficient.
- Ask candidates for public office what they are prepared to do to protect and restore wetlands.
- Encourage the use of wetlands to minimize stormwater runoff.

Action by Church or School

- Help homilists incorporate care of creation themes.
- Organize prayerful celebrations of creation on special days such as St. Francis of Assisi, October 4; St. Isidore, May 15; Earth Day, April 22; resurrect Ember Days to thank God for the gifts of creation.
- Suggest and help organize a wetland appreciation day at your parish.

Visit one of these web resources:

- *Renewing the Earth*, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, (www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.shtml)
- National Wetlands Research Center, United States Geological Survey, (www.nwrc.usgs.gov/)
- America's WETLAND: Campaign to Save Coastal Louisiana, (www.americaswetlandresources.com/)