



Smithsonian



WALTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION

WaterWays Film Discussion Guide

These four films examine the waterways of South Louisiana. 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 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 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?

Station 15

Directed by Kira Akerman; co-directed by Sophie Tintori. 15 minutes.

Often labeled a “sinking city,” New Orleans is a place where flooding occurs all too regularly. Water pumping stations strategically placed throughout the city serve as the front line of defense. The film portrays a day in the life of the DPS 6 pump station (formerly the biggest pump station in the world) through the eyes of Chasity Hunter, a teenager from the surrounding neighborhood, who interviews geographer Richard Campanella of Tulane University, geomorphologist Denise Reed of the Water Institute for the Gulf, and pumping station operator James Taylor in an effort to understand the ways New Orleans coexists with water.

1. Why does the filmmaker choose high-school student Chasity Hunter as our guide to the issues of water management in New Orleans? What effect does her age have on the way we receive the information?
2. Why do we begin with Chasity’s memory of Hurricane Katrina in 2005?
3. Richard Campanella points out that the drainage of water 300 years ago enabled the creation of the city of New Orleans. Was the colonial-era decision to drain the area a good one? What kind of consequences resulted from this decision? Does it tie us to the past? If so, in which ways?
4. How does the story of New Orleans compare to the story of land draining in the Netherlands, Belgium, and eastern England with series of dykes? How does the story of New Orleans compare with the story of Venice, another city that is slowly being submerged? What lessons can we learn from these comparisons?
5. The pump stations in New Orleans contribute to soil subsidence that makes the land even lower and more flood-prone. Does pumping out the water make things worse rather than better? Is it just time to give up? Can you think of another example of a solution to one problem causing other problem in turn?
6. Chasity says: “The city was built on control: walls, and barricades that stop us from seeing what it really is.” What does she mean?
7. Is it true that “safety is a binary concept: you’re either safe or not safe?” Are there any grey areas?

8. Do you think Chasity was comforted by what she learned or not? Are you comforted? Why or why not?
9. How does living in New Orleans force a person to accept the ambiguity of water?
10. What do we mean when we say “natural disaster”? Was Katrina a natural disaster? Were the 2017 New Orleans floods a natural disaster? What about the flooding that took place in the Baton Rouge area in 2016? Do humans contribute to natural disasters?
11. Have you seen floods in your town? What impacts did they have? Have changes been made to make you safe?
12. What technologies exist in your local community to control water? Do they always work? What personal adaptations or interventions can we make to manage rain, flooding, or erosion on our property? In our town?
13. Do you think that New Orleans can meet the challenges of extreme rainfall events?
14. Poet Kalamu ya Salaam tells Chasity, “What man has done, man can do.” What do you think this means? How does this apply to flood protection and restoration?
15. Can poetry, art, and literature contribute to understanding this crisis? How so?
16. After Katrina, some said New Orleans should be abandoned. What do you think? Should we protect New Orleans? Why or why not?

Keepers of the Mound

Directed by Katie Mathews. 17 minutes.

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 Chauvin 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.

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?

Born on the Bayou

Directed by Kevin McCaffrey. 23 minutes.

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.

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 Chermie, 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?

Diversions

Directed by John Richie. 24 minutes.

Plaquemines Parish, located just south of New Orleans, runs the entire length of the Mississippi on both banks of the river. No area of the state has been more impacted by coastal land loss. The State of Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan calls for a sediment diversion to begin replenishing the marshlands, building back the land using its original creator: the river. Residents are divided over the plan. Some welcome the prospect of saving their homes, while many oyster farmers fear the diversions will destroy their oyster beds and their livelihood. This film travels through Plaquemines communities exploring the science of diversion and the dilemmas it creates.

1. What role does music play in creating a mood or ambience in a film?
2. Is coastal restoration a losing proposition? Should we just let nature happen? Are we complicit in this erosion? Is the creation of an artificial reef too much intervention in nature?
3. We see many more local people in this film as the filmmaker explores the impact of coastal erosion on schools, residents, and communities. Why does this film introduce us to local individuals rather than government employees, scientists, or civil engineers?
4. Plaquemines Parish is mostly surrounded by water. What special issues does this bring?
5. This film juxtaposes the different needs of Plaquemines residents. Some are in favor of the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion and others are opposed. Why? What are the issues?
6. All of South Louisiana is composed of sediment from the Mississippi River. Is this surprising? Will the sediment diversion restore the land to the way it was before erosion?
7. Why might the introduction of more freshwater hurt the oyster business? Why can't the fishermen get oysters somewhere else?
8. What are the rights of the oyster fishermen in contrast to those of the residents on dry land who want avoid flooding? Should the oyster fishermen have to adapt to the changes? Do they have a right to their traditional fishing grounds?
9. Albertine Kimble says the sediment diversion will be the parish's salvation, but Peter Vujnovich says the sediment diversion threatens his livelihood and his sons' future because of the fresh water it will bring into Barataria Bay. Who has the best argument

here?

10. Albertine Kimble says, “Mother Nature—she’s gonna get you either way. If it ain’t water, it’ll be wind. It’s just as well the insurance pays. That’s my only concern.” Why does she keep rebuilding her house and raising it higher off the ground? What do you think about Kimble’s persistence? Why don’t people in low-lying or threatened areas just relocate?
11. If we don’t save Plaquemines Parish, why should we save any place? Is one area of land worth less or more than others?
12. Does it make economic sense to try to stop the coastal erosion now?

Explore these questions after you've watched all four 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