

Cajuns losing Louisiana island home to erosion

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(Deep in the bayous of Louisiana, time seems to move more slowly, but not moving slowly enough to save a community of Native Americans living on a strip of an island that is being swallowed by the sea

Deep in the bayous of Louisiana, time seems to move more slowly.

But it's not moving slowly enough to save a community of Native Americans living on a strip of an island that is being swallowed by the

sea.

The southern US state has lost nearly 2,000 square miles (5,000 square kilometers) of [coastal wetlands](#) since the 1930s. Major efforts aimed at restoring the coast have slowed the erosion, but Louisiana is still losing about a football field of coastline every hour.

Maryline Naquin, 70, has a front row seat.

"In the back, that was full of trees," Naquin said as she sat on her porch, which is raised high off the ground on stilts to keep the house dry when the inevitable storm surge washes through.

"Now, just water. Plenty of water."

The community of Isle de Jean Charles was born when a French man sought a new home after he was disowned for marrying a Native American woman in the early 1800s. Nearly all their children married members of local tribes and their families grew.

The island was home to about 700 families and even had room for cow and horse pastures when Naquin was a girl. Today, there are only about 30 families left, and many fear the next big storm could force them out forever.

"This is all we've known and we can't see ourselves living like in a subdivision, real close to people," she said. "The ones that are left don't want to leave."

A massive levee system is being built to protect communities along the coast, but Isle de Jean Charles is not one of them. Federal and state officials determined it was simply too costly.

With no insurance, Naquin won't be able to rebuild the next time a big storm seriously damages her home. She seems resigned to her fate, even as she is determined to stay as long as she can.

"Can't bring it back. We're trying, but we can't. It's not going to happen," Naquin told AFP.



Trash is scattered in front of a house on the Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana

Katrina washed away coast

Over the years, the taming of the mighty Mississippi River slowed the influx of fresh sediment and water that once sustained the coastal delta. Then the oil and gas companies started cutting shipping and access channels that helped salt water from the Gulf of Mexico reach the fragile

marshes.

By the time Hurricane Katrina struck on August 29, 2005, the coast was already in deep trouble.

Most of the attention after the massive storm was focused on the dramatic destruction of New Orleans. On the bayous, people had trouble getting help rebuilding their homes. Then Hurricane Rita struck a few weeks later.

The two storms did more damage than the 25 previous years of erosion combined. About 330 square miles of marsh—an area bigger than Bahrain—were transformed into open water.

The 2010 BP oil spill threatened even more coastal destruction as a pungent mix of oil and chemical dispersants soaked into the delicate grasses holding the wetlands in place.

From the spill came new hope, however, as billions in fines were directed towards coastal restoration.

The residents of Isle de Jean Charles however fear it may be too late for them.

Chris Chaisson, 32, was among those forced off the island in search of work and a more stable existence for his family.

He regrets that he will not be able to raise his son on the island that generations of his family called home. He wonders if his son's children will even be able to visit.

"You're losing a heritage, you're losing a culture of people that lived off the land," said Chaisson, an activist who has been fighting [coastal](#)

[erosion](#) for a decade.



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"This community is about to be extinct because of the erosion and there's no real solution to protect it from the Gulf."

'It's too late'

Pastor Keith Naquin remembers his childhood on the island as another world.

"If it be in the morning, everybody had the French music playing. If it be

in the afternoon, well, somebody was always outside cooking," said Naquin, who now lives about a 20-minute drive inland.



Marilyn Naquin cooks at her home on the Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana but with no insurance, Naquin won't be able to rebuild the next time a big storm seriously damages her home

"A trip down the island road was a little journey. You never knew where you were going to stop but there was always somewhere to stop. Everyone was pretty much family."

He said the bayous were once so full of shrimp he once caught 1,000 pounds (450 kilograms) with a net in just a few hours, only stopping because he got tired.

People can still make a living off the water, but they have to go much farther out to fish. And the island is a ghost town.

"The sadness would be that was a good way of life," he said, adding that while he's frustrated, he doesn't waste his energy being angry.

"It's too late."

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