

ESA HISTORICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE

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NEWSLETTER

*Resources for the history of the Ecological Society of America
and the history of ecology and allied sciences*

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Environmental History from Below: The Louisiana Sea Grant Oral History Project

In anticipation of ESA's upcoming meeting in New Orleans in August, we highlight an innovative oral history project conducted as part of the Louisiana Sea Grant program at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. Two Sea Grant Scholars, Don Davis and Carl Brasseaux, along with other interviewers, have conducted dozens of interviews of people from all walks of life. The project's goal is to preserve a record of local and traditional knowledge by interviewing residents of Louisiana's coastal towns and villages.

The project aims to capture the history of the wetlands for future generations. Some of the interviews refer to events and experiences going back to the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Several interviews are available online at:

<http://www.laseagrant.org/communications/voices/oral-histories/> where you can find both unedited audio tapes of the interviews as well as transcripts.

What might you find there? Interview subjects, in recounting their family histories and the histories of their communities, are also charting how changes in human activities have affected the fragile coastal ecosystems. Some who have been involved in environmental restoration discuss how new programs have worked to reverse environmental damage. For example, Davis and Brasseaux interviewed Edmond Mouton, a program manager for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. He discussed how the sharp decline in trapping of native muskrat and introduced nutria, a consequence of economic changes in the fur industry, resulted in increased erosion in the marshlands. Following surveys of the coast to determine how much damage was being done, a bounty program started in the hunting season of 2002-2003. Trappers received a few dollars for each tail turned in. By the time of Mouton's interview in 2012, the program had been operating for a decade. Mouton estimated that the bounty program had helped reduce the damaged area from 80,000 to 100,000 acres over the decade, to a little over 4,000 acres. At the same time, efforts were being made to promote the use of fur, especially of nutria, in countries such as China, to provide more economic incentive for trapping the animals.

A synopsis of a few key themes of the interviews has been compiled and uploaded as well. It contains observations not only about coastal activities such as boat-building and fishing, but also about attitudes toward coastal wetlands and the failure to appreciate the value of wetlands.

Other Archival and Published Sources for Louisiana Environmental History

At Loyola University in New Orleans, the collection of the **Ecology Center of Louisiana**, adding up to 83 linear feet, preserves a record of correspondence, articles and newsletters from the Ecology Center's founding in 1969 until 1987, when its president and co-founder, J. Ross Vincent, a chemical engineer, moved out of state. More information on this collection can be found by checking the listing in the online catalog ArchivGrid: <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/collection/data/767524447>

For a long-term environmental history of the Mississippi, ranging across five centuries, see Christopher Morris's book of 2012, *The Big Muddy: An environmental history of the Mississippi and its peoples, from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The Oral History Project of the Historical Records Committee

Led by Dennis Knight, former Chair of the Historical Records Committee, HRC's oral history project began as part of the wider celebration of ESA's Centennial in 2015. Oral histories of people prominent in the Ecological Society were conducted by Dennis, as well as other members of the Historical Records Committee and of ESA between 2012 and 2016. The interviews were sent to the ESA archives at the University of Georgia's Hargrett Library, where Christian Lopez processed them before making them available online. Christian reports that the first collection of these interviews is now available online at: <http://russelldoc.galib.uga.edu/russell/view?docId=ead/RBRL416ESA-ead.xml;query=esa;brand=default>

The interviews available are of the following people: Robert Paine, Lawrence Bliss, Gordon Orians, Ori Loucks, Yaffa Grossman, Jean Langenheim, Patricia Werner, John Hobbie, James Brown, Scott Collins, Arthur Cooper, George Woodwell, Margaret Davis, Stuart Chapin, Marjorie Holland, Simon Levin, Harold Mooney, Katherine McCarter, William Reiners, Frances James, and Gene Likens.

These interviews will be processed and made available later: Robert K. Peet, Steward T. A. Pickett, and Dennis Knight. The HRC appreciates all the help it has received from members of ESA in conducting these interviews.

We welcome more oral histories. Our Committee has an interview kit, including a compact digital recorder, permission forms, and general instructions, which we would be happy to send to anyone who would like to conduct an oral history, or make available for your use at the annual meeting. (Interviews are roughly 1.5 to 2 hours in length, but can be longer). Please contact either Dennis Knight (DHKnight@uwyo.edu) or Sharon Kingsland (sharon@jhu.edu) if you would like us to send you a kit, or if you would be interested in doing an interview with us. The annual meetings are a good opportunity to arrange these interviews.

<p>The Newsletter is issued quarterly. Please send news items or suggestions at any time to Sharon Kingsland (sharon@jhu.edu).</p>
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