

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jon Bowermaster, dir. *SoLa: Louisiana Water Stories*. Edited by Chris Cavanagh. Produced by Oceans 8 Productions. Oley: Bullfrog Films, 2010. 62 min. \$250.00 (dvd), ISBN 978-1-59458-996-6.

Reviewed by Craig Colten (Louisiana State University)

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Experienced marine explorer and filmmaker Jon Bowermaster has produced a visually pleasing documentary about Louisiana's ongoing struggles with its humid situation. The state faces a series of river, wetland, and coastal issues that Bowermaster addresses in a compelling narrative told by a series of long-time local activists. The basic story is one that is very familiar to local residents, but bears repeating for those who only hear about the state following one of its all too frequent watery calamities—hurricanes, oil spills, and river floods.

Bowermaster has assembled an eloquent cast of spokespeople drawn from a dedicated if small corps of environmental champions. From the post-Katrina critic of the Corps of Engineers Ivor Von Heerden; to the soft spoken and genuinely compelling former state agency director Louisiana native Paul Temple; to the eloquent and effective leaders of grassroots environmental struggles against petrochemical giants, Mary Lee Orr and Wilma Subra; to the Spanish-born transplant Dean Wilson, who now keeps an eye on Atchafalaya Basin, the cast consistently makes convincing cases that they love living in Louisiana despite the political corruption, environmental abuses, and personal threats. Bowermaster uses their personal stories to frame larger environmental issues.

SoLa presents several short stories: the impacts of controlling the Mississippi River and the resulting coastal land loss, the damages wrought by abusive extractive activities on the biologically rich Atchafalaya Basin, the consequences of chemicals on the coastal and riparian communities, the economic threats to traditional fishing communities, and finally the under-compensated de-

pletion of the state's massive natural resource base due to corrupt politics and unsustainable consumption practices. By limiting the narrative to a modest number of vignettes, Bowermaster is able to maintain the viewer's attention; however, at times the individual segments seem to stray from the central point.

My chief criticism relates to the single most timely story—the 2010 BP oil release in the Gulf of Mexico. It is an essential topic to include, but it is crudely stitched on largely as an afterthought—likely the result of the production schedule. After a brief wrap-up that revisits each of the key narrators from the other stories, Bowermaster adds a brief presentation about the BP oil gusher. It comes across as a last minute edit to escape prerelease obsolescence, and does not share the personalized individual accounts that make the other sections so compelling.

The issues south Louisiana faces resemble the dilemmas other coastal areas will face with rising sea levels and intensified coastal weather events. This fragile coastline, with established fisheries and intense resource extraction activities, does not represent a sustainable situation. Despite the economic lure in the fisheries, the oil industry, and coastal recreation, there has been a gradual retreat from the shore over the past century. Coastal storms, land loss, and degradation of the estuarine and coastal ecologies have impelled residents to give up on their tight-knit ethnic communities and migrate inland. Other coastal locations around the globe will likely see similar, slow retreats—not wholesale and rapid abandonment. So south Louisiana stands as a bell weather for other coastal locations—a point that the film does not

make, but could have to highlight universal themes.

Ultimately, this film will likely resonate with a general audience. The language is clear and not overly technical. I could foresee showing it in an undergraduate class on Louisiana geography, coastal ecology, or environmental studies. It will likely captivate the attention of younger college students.

I was a bit frustrated that I was unable to play the CD on my computer, even after updating my media software. Nonetheless, I had no problem viewing it on my single-purpose DVD player connected to my television. Despite the minor technical issues and personally suffering from overexposure to Louisiana's water stories in the wake of our ever-too-frequent recent calamities, this engaging documentary should offer satisfying insights to those removed from day-to-day immersion in the subject.

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